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HAVENING

by

John Linstrom

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2013

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This master's thesis is dedicated to

Curtis and Ruth Johnson

and

Robert E. Linstrom,

and in loving memory to

Marcene Linstrom.

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PROLOGUE

Dear Bailey,

I want you to know that I know where you lived.

I have visited the cottage on the lake you called Bailiwick. I walked around without the permission of the Girl Scout troops to whom you sold the land. I took pictures and peered in your windows.

And I know all too well the room where you slept as a child. I have spent more time than you would care to know in that house. I have been paid to sit in it, walk around in it, thumb through the refuse of your family's past. I have slept in that house, lying on the floorboards, listening for your ghost.

I have stood outside of Sage Place, shaking, angry. Angry with your own beloved daughter, that she could give the place away for student housing, leaving all the literature from your library on the shelves, thinking the students might read it. Angry that I didn't have the courage to knock on that door and search the place like I have your family's home.

I have touched your birth certificate, your wedding certificate, your childhood glasses. I have hefted your father's ancient hoe. I have read your mother's poetry. I have photographed hundreds of pages of correspondence, some of which I may never even read. I have stood in the room where you were born and, four years later, watched your mother die. I have rocked the rocker in which she rocked you.

And I followed you before I even knew you. I had biked the South Haven road that bears your name, had set foot in your house as a bored and disinterested child on a field trip, had even dated the descendent of one of your in-laws before I knew who you were. I was already reading

the work that once inspired you. I stood on the same bluff along the same freshwater sea, have built sand castles on the same Lake Michigan beach that you once knew so well. And all before I knew you at all like I do now.

I have travelled across the country to the unkempt mausoleum that bears your body. I stood on my toes to see between the bars and into that space where ancient stone plaques had fallen from their places and cracked into bits. I breathed the stale air, the cement and dead leaves, and I turned to look down the hill to Lake Cayuga. And the next day I tore through archives of your personal papers and found the scrap of paper where you had written, in that flamboyant airy hand, that you would forever look over Cayuga's shores.

Sometimes, in my chase of you, I frighten myself. Or, more accurately, I am frightened by how you seem to keep leading me on. Don't think I didn't notice on the plane, from Denver to Newark and en route to Ithaca, after passing over Lake Michigan and not seeing a single wave through the stormy sky, the rift, the way the clouds parted right over that Michigan harbor, the distinct twin piers and the sloping shoreline. I looked at the flight map and looked back out the window. I took it all in, my spine tingling, and when the cloud cover closed again I turned back to the biography.

This all started with that biography, by the man who never met you. Philip Dorf took your life, the fragments that had already been preserved in so many memories, and passed it on to me, after even his death. And that's when I started searching, when I found John, John the caretaker of your birth home who had fallen as obsessively for you as I would. And John took me in, gave me work to do, handed me your manifesto, *The Holy Earth*, and told me it would change my life.

John has dreams about you, you know. One summer, while we were working at the museum, he told me the one where he saw you, looking up as from a crypt, preserved like Lenin, a single white lily in your still hands. Your head faced west, John said. Toward your hometown.

My dear Bailey (that's what your old friend Walter Willcox called you in his address at your ninetieth birthday party—not Liberty, not the family name Tom, but just “my dear Bailey”)—my dear, we are linked, and we are simply more inseparable, it seems, with time. Your ninety-six productive years on this earth weigh on me, a young twenty-five-year-old and in good health, strangely. Yet I am not the only young person in the world to feed so incessantly on the ideas of one long-dead writer and his high ideals—perhaps I'm in better company than I think.

I am inspired by your books, and I am inspired by the way in which they've been forgotten. I keep trying to find you. I want to bring you back.

Please stay with me. Please do not grow old. I need you, I think maybe more people do too, but I'm not sure I understand why. But this book is my attempt to push the question

CHAPTER ONE, BEGINNING

We start, over and over, with what we already know. In the beginning, Words. But we didn't make the words up, so we learn digging, we try our hands at story-archaeology and try to get closer to where all the saying came from. Sometimes it takes a while to find the people with the stories. We're lucky when we do.

Once, untold generations ago, Kija Manito was out walking. I say walking, but I mean it in the way a bear walks, rambling. He rambled because he sought—this was no stroll—he needed a place to set his throne, his seat of governance for all of Mishigan, the Great Lake, boundless sea, and its lands. Everywhere, everybody got out of the way—the Blackbirds, the Squirrels, the People, even the Wolves and Foxes—because Kija Manito, Lord of Waters and all Lakeland, was on the prowl.

In the great inner forests, he climbed the tallest Pine. In the dark and musty swamplands, he scoured every hillock. In the misty northern mountains, he leapt from peak to peak. And he swam through all five sweet-water seas, scanning the rolling shore, the cliffs and dunes and stretching beaches. All Mishigan caught its breath in his wake, and it seemed he'd never decide.

But he had. Kija Manito differed from other incarnations of the Great Spirit, just as the Mishigan lands differed from other lands. His land was beaten regularly, every day and on all sides, by waves, the rolling domain of Whitefish, Herring, and Muskellunge. In thick storms, these seas terrify the two- and four-leggeds of the land, who hear the waves pound the dunes. But Kija Manito knew the deep sea bottoms of the Whitefish, where he dove and swam, as well as the deep swamps of the Deer—and the great secret he carried was the supreme Quiet of the Earth, the slow steadiness that ran deeper than the rush. The land and the sea were not so

different, he knew, because his domain encompassed both. But just as the lake sea battered the land's edges, so the land bounded the waters and kept them in check, and from this, the force and absorption, emerged Silence. So, with this silent wisdom, he chose his seat.

Hawawnaw, that sandy spot at the mouth of Maw Kaw, the mouth of Black River, where it empties into Mishigan—this place he chose, where the land did not need to boast in the face of Mishigan's terrible horizon.

At the highest point of duneland overlooking the mouth, Ishpeming, he placed his throne Kitchiwik. That night, the sun set red over the Lake, and Kija Manito left his new throne. The stars shone clear in Tchibekana, the Galaxy on High. He strode northward, his head back and eyes up, slowly and in tears. From his pockets, he scattered seven billion stones of every color, shape, and size. Each fell darkly into the sands, and in the day, they outshone the Galaxy.

No such charming stones, excepting those, could anywhere be found around all the shores of the Great Lake.¹

CHAPTER TWO, REMAP

“Liberty Hyde Bailey.” Search.

Nine results found. I jot call numbers onto a page of student planner, log out. They’ve got a biography—I’ll start there.

This is college. This is the fourth and quietest floor of the new library at Valparaiso University, with a fireplace nook and three walls of night-black glass. My stomach growls; my backpack holds a laptop, stack of papers, and empty coffee mug. Engineers and international students hunch over shared study tables.

I have not heard of Liberty Hyde Bailey. I laugh when Dad pronounces his name over the phone—Liberty—imagined a colorful western character, like old Buffalo Bill Cody or John Liver-Eating Johnston. Who names their child Liberty?

I pull the old green hardcover off the shelf, open to the copyright page. 1956. Flip back. Facing the cover page, a weathered old man with a lopsided face looks at the camera as if to me, hunched, right hand pointing to the page of a book on the desk in front of him. His expression might be serious or bemused; I can’t tell. His open book rests on a mess of journals and loose pages, and in the background stand rows of books on shelves, spines a dark grayscale. I skip the prefatory note and turn to chapter one.

SAND dunes blown up into bluffs by the winds of bygone ages made a high white wall holding in check Lake Michigan’s unruly waters. Through these dunes the Black River, flowing westerly across the Wolverine peninsula, had cut a deep channel. At the river’s mouth lay the small settlement of South Haven. For some distance inland, marshlands flanked the river’s steep banks; then the primeval forest began. In a clearing in the

woods, about a mile or more from the lake shore, a settler had built a small frame house.

Here, on March 15, 1858, a boy was born and named after his father, Liberty Hyde Bailey.

White wall, Black River. I snap the book shut and look up. Rows of pages sit on shelves around me, information simmering through the thin inkiness between them, unread. Desperate students, overwhelmed enough with assigned readings, slip off to the stairwell to call friends or to the bathroom stall to relieve themselves in one of several ways. Bodies grow soft and tense in spaces like these. *Small settlement, steep banks.*

My heart races. The riverbank forms and reforms in my mind. I never thought in this library I'd read a description of my hometown.

I left town not wanting to come back. In my commencement speech, standing at the podium on a platform in the middle of Radcliffe Field, the varsity football field, soccer field, and track, in front of a block of 150 black-clad classmates I had known since kindergarten, I quoted Nelson Mandela, spoke about diversity and purpose and embracing discomfort, and encouraged everyone to look for fulfilling and engaged lives, no matter where they found themselves next. *Get out of here*, is what I thought. I remember the sky was blue, and the trees beyond the bleachers and the end lines rustled.

After the ceremony, pictures—with my best friends, with my parents and brothers, with my grandparents and Uncle Steve. With my girlfriend Laura. I lingered after my family left, gloated jokingly among the sweaty band members who would have “Pomp and Circumstance” stuck in their heads for a week, and tried to keep light-hearted around Laura.

It had been a last-minute fling initiated by senior prom. She was a German foreign

exchange student with soft brown eyes, and I was smitten. We had a month between prom and her departure for Germany, and I knew that was about it. I wrote her a poem for her birthday, and she gave me a green plastic rose.

Laura hopped into her host mom's car, and they drove. I walked past the scoreboard and the end line, through the parking lot, toward the chain-link fence and the rift I knew in it. From there I descended into the old untended ravine, a remnant of the ancient system of creeks that used to riddle the watershed. Mud slurped around my dress shoes. I had to catch my mortar board when a branch lifted it from my head. I jumped the creek and walked up the other side, emerging into the clean green backyard of my parents' house.

I had made the same ravine shortcut three years before, armed with a silver trumpet instead of a mortar board and an unfolded note in my hand, in love with a graduating senior who I had dated since December.

But it's okay this time, I said. This is it, finally—I'm leaving. I still hoped she would return my emails.

LIBERTY HYDE BAILEY—SOUTH HAVEN'S FAVORITE SON. That's what they called him, the newspaper writers for the daily in South Haven, back when he'd stop by town to visit friends and deliver lectures in first decades of the 1900s. He always made the headlines. WORLD OFFERS FIELD IN KNOWLEDGE QUEST, EMINENT SCIENTIST SAYS. LIBERTY BAILEY'S TALK A REAL SERMON. FOUND BOTH KINDS OF BARBERRY HE SOUGHT. BAILEY CALLS SOUTH HAVEN HOME TO OLD FRIENDS.

He left. One of the first children born in the settlement of South Haven when it was still frontier, still sawmill, hotel, and harbor, born just three years before the nation to the south and

east splintered into War, Bailey left when he came of age and, though he later built that fine stone cottage on the far shore of Lake Cayuga near Ithaca, New York, a place to live and plant his apples, he could never truthfully be said to have settled in any one place again.

If you've ever studied horticulture, you'd know that he's kept on the move. You'd have seen him in the footnotes of your textbooks, the Father of Modern Horticulture. The man who defied academe and asserted the right—the necessity—to study the farmer's trade, who pioneered the land-grant extension system and made the fledgling agriculture program at Cornell into a College—that and became its Dean—the man who fought for young students' right not to sit inside all day but be out and learn from trees and snails, who fought before it was popular or dangerous even for the rights of the workers of the land and who that wily first Roosevelt would appoint to chair the national Commission on Country Life, who wrote the philosophy that would shape those big names of agrarian thinking, Leopold, Berry, Jackson.

"We have been living in a get-rich-quick age," Bailey wrote in 1911, fifty-three then and preparing for retirement. "Persons have wanted to make fortunes. Our business enterprises are organized with that in view. Persons are now asking how they may live a satisfactory life, rather than placing the whole emphasis on the financial turnover of a business. There is greater need of more good farmers than of more millionaires."²

But Bailey left the farm. He left and went to college and became a professor. He'd remember the family farm and the long days spent with his silent, grave father, among apple trees or in the milking stall or between the rows of corn, and he'd remember his increasingly quaint hometown, its musty two-room schoolhouse and the rank smell of Fish Town and the rickety lake ships. He'd spend much of his life fighting for rural communities, no doubt keeping a special place in his heart for them, but he also became a botanist. When he retired at fifty-

three, he spent the rest of his life, into his nineties, travelling the world, soon better known for his wild plant-collecting excursions into China and the Amazon and the Antilles than anything. He left and became a wanderer, a separate soul, displaced and roaming.

In 2011 Google Maps vastly improved its satellite imagery of South Haven. Jared, who became my best friend in kindergarten and who finally moved to Arizona—and that just because Jordan had to move there for his boyfriend’s teaching job which meant there was a couch and therefore a place to stay while Jared tried his hand at culinary school—Jared posted a permalink to a close-up of his mom’s property, a trailer home nestled between front yard, horse pasture, and forest, to his Facebook wall, with the comment “missing this place.” I sat in my basement bedroom in the center of Iowa, leaned toward the screen and scrolled down the country road into town.

Let me try to translate the aerial into three-dimensional vision. I place myself on the worn dirt driveway, imagine Jared’s two dogs, Ebby and CD—now dead—barking as I materialize in front of them. No one else home. The air dust smells and tastes like horse, and I pause at the fence to watch the horses chew their hay. Then I run down the driveway in my old running shoes and high school cross country sweatshirt, and, as my real fingers press and slide across my laptop’s touchpad, my high school heel twists and kicks gravel in first a left turn down 68th and then a right on Phoenix. To my left, an old painted sign marks the abandoned go-cart track that once was Fideland Fun Park—the landmark that has always taken me to Jared’s. There’s a clean-looking liquor store on the right where Jared and I once bought milk to make milkshakes, labeled on Google Maps as Phoenix Country Market.

Now my memory falters, so I kick my heels and glide. Tan and black rooftops slide past with the scraggle winter trees and sunburnt yards and time-frozen cars—a pile of branches

caught in a creek that passes under the road sits static. I can't recognize the rooftops I know. At some point I must pass over the animal hospital, then Camp Agudah Midwest. VanDerZee Motorplex marks the beginning of the first region of South Haven proper—the new, shiny chrome-looking façade attempting to replicate something out of the sixties, and inside, which I've never seen, the old soda fountain that used to be downtown where I worked two summers at MacDonald Drug Store, until VanDerZee bought it and moved it to his new property. Then, Veterans Boulevard leads to the new community branch of Lake Michigan College, and beyond it is old Sherman's Dairy Bar, the original building that used to be part of a full dairying operation but now just makes the ice cream, still, nearly all of the ice cream for the whole beach town and all of the Sherman's Ice Cream that you might find anywhere in Michigan. In place of dairy cattle, now Blue the big blue plastic cow stands guard up above the entrance, surveying the long lines of tourists each summer, each waiting for another taste of that small-town experience.

But welcome to Sprawl. Highlights include the Big Boy where we'd eat after school concerts and plays, Menards where we bought the squirrel baffle for the bird feeder, Wal-Mart where my parents buy their nonperishables not because they are cheap or backward but because they can afford it, Consumer's Credit Union, the Ramada Inn and Hamilton Inn, and several fast food and gas station options to help you get out of town or pass by it. Sprawl's not extensive—Wal-Mart and Menards are our only giant box stores, but the vote just passed to let a Meijer move into town. Two of our three grocery stores closed after Wal-Mart expanded into a supercenter; we'll see how the Village Market down by the high school weathers a Meijer.

After crossing over I-196, still moving west, you're in a transition zone. A few more fast food joints, the AutoZone, Barden's Farm Market where Mom likes to get zucchini and blueberries in the summer, and the Walgreens that threatens to help kill the remaining local

pharmacies once Meijer joins its ranks. Cross Blue Star Highway, and you're entering the South Side. Phoenix keeps its four lanes, but the world crowds around it on either side—you could turn right on Cherry Street and in three blocks you'd make it to the house where Laura lived during her exchange year here, and in a few more blocks you'd see the brown sign pointing to Radcliffe Field, and on the other side of that block is my parents' place, the old Listiak house.

Continue on, past Broadway, and you'll hit downtown, the two-block stretch that has remained the city's spine for the past hundred fifty years even as the major cross street, Central, has declined. Here's MacDonald Drug Store (sans soda fountain), City Hall, old Clementine's Restaurant with the copper ceiling that was once a bank, the Golden Brown Bakery where a group of old men sit for breakfast every weekday morning before first-hour at the high school starts, and a whole gaggle of newer stores that forever rotate in the cycles of business.

And if you drive down Phoenix, you will come to the Black River Tavern and then see it. The road turns and starts downhill, following the river where the marina and the little grassy park sit, and beyond it, water—Lake Michigan—that Great Sweetwater Sea that every road seems to lead us to, the horizon of our world and the backdrop of everything, the source of our tourism existence and the reason we weathered our Rust Belt years when the auto factories pulled out of town. A girlfriend from a suburb of Detroit once told me that Michiganders from her side of the state saw West-Michiganders as posh, less “gritty,” tidier and better-off. She didn't understand that we depended on the success of her city for our economy once. When they failed, we failed. But there were less of us, our racial violence was better covered-up and less prone to their riots, and small towns are supposed to be poor, anyway. So if they come here as tourists and want to believe in the vision we sell them, downtown and on the North Side of the river where everything is Sherman's Ice Cream and cool lake breezes, the better for us. We'll take your

money. But we're not the posh ones.

I left town not wanting to come back, until I became obsessed. Sometimes in conversation I feel the need to defend my Bailey obsession, why I'm still studying him when he's so largely forgotten, why I don't focus on a bigger name or even someone who I find more richly poetic. I don't have a very good answer, so sometimes I just tell 'em that us townies got to stick together.

I think I have this idea that, if I help Bailey out by spreading the good word, he'll help me out too. So I search his books, most of them period printings because they've been out of print so long—and my Bailey library amasses. The guy was crazy prolific, writing 65 books and editing some 140 others over the span of his ninety-six-year life. A lot of them are practical horticultural texts, but others are philosophy, poetry, allegory, political theory. Accumulating them has become a habit—I've read some ten of his books so far, cover-to-cover, and only written a couple articles about them, but I have nearly two shelves of his books now. Sometimes they're cheap online, and I feel sneaky buying them, like I'm getting away with this huge deal. But no, I'm not entirely sure why my Bailey books get privileged over, say, Robert Frost or Margaret Atwood—writers on a different bookshelf. I want to understand this guy, this guy who grew up in 13odunk little South Haven back before it was even the small town it is now, when it was more just a crossroads near farms, when it was forest without end, when it was the site of annual Potawatomie gatherings of hundreds of boats up the channel to make maple syrup and bury it, for safe-keeping, silently into the earth. I want to understand the town that he knew, that he shaped, and how it led to me and the other hundred fifty of us who graduated that spring in 2006, half-scattered now over the state, the Midwest, and the country. I want to understand this guy who left the farm for the university, this horticulturalist who had the balls to write

philosophy and poetry even when he wasn't the best poet. I want to understand this guy who, in his mid-nineties, held the mouthpiece of that 1950s Dictaphone and croakily told his interviewer that his biggest regret was leaving Michigan.

I remember standing once at the edge of an open field. I had been gone from South Haven for less than a semester, home maybe for Thanksgiving, spending time with hometown friends at a corn maze. A mowed grassy strip of field separated the corn maze from the line of unmowed weeds along the border of an untended forest. I detached myself momentarily from my friends to walk toward the woods, thought about walking into them, losing myself for a while in the trackless maze of trees. Something about that forest being there seemed so careless. I didn't enter, but stood there awhile in my oversized corduroy jacket and dollar cotton gloves, the warmth of recent hot cider in my cheeks, having a freshman moment. On the border of these worlds I felt at home, havened, in a way that I didn't even quite feel in the car with my friends, laughing, moments before. A strong November wind shook the tops of the old trees in front of me, and I shivered with them.

I came to Bailey through a failed small-town program hosted by a local institution that everyone—almost everyone—thought had also failed. I had called my father from the concrete patio outside of the Valparaiso library and excitedly told him all about ecopoetics and Thoreau and Whitman, the subjects of my ambitious honors project. He listened, probably too graciously. Then he mentioned this funny-named guy, Liberty Hyde Bailey. He actually grew up in South Haven, and he wrote “environmental books.” Apparently, Dad explained, the director of the local Bailey Museum was leading a book study at the local community college on a book called

The Holy Earth. Maybe I'd be interested.

"Maybe you'd be interested" is not a sentence that always sounds good to someone already overwhelmed by a big research project. My dad would expect me to look into it.

"There's a Bailey Museum?" I asked. *Yes*, Dad explained, with practiced mock-exasperation, *it's always been there, on Bailey Avenue, next to the hospital. You've driven by a million times.* I swore I'd never heard of it.

I thanked him for the tip, wondering. After we hung up, I headed back in, logged into one of the public computers, and pulled up the library catalogue.

"Liberty Hyde Bailey." Search.

That museum director was John Stempien, who had inherited a cluttered house museum in a small town with decades of accumulated antiques from the area and very little cohesion or narrative. The back room, he remembers, had something like five antique pianos manufactured in the old Everett Piano Factory in town, two pump organs, and cases full of rocks and arrowheads. He came as an unpaid intern, a nontraditional student back in college for a teaching degree in history. He read *The Holy Earth* and fell in love. Less than a year after his internship, a member of the museum's board of directors—a collection of big-hearted local volunteers, mostly retirees—called John to ask if he'd like to become the first paid director of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum. His position would replace the old part-time docent position, a position John later described as "a community retirement fund." It was a part-time gig for fifteen bucks an hour over the summer, and he'd be accompanied by a paid part-time curator at ten bucks an hour. The museum itself had next to no funds, but the two positions would be paid by the city. He agreed.

Five years into directing the museum, he decided to advertise a book study. The museum had communicated with Bailey's alma mater, Michigan State University, to republish *The Holy Earth*, the book that got John hooked, and he hoped the book study would help spread the word about the new edition. So Dad heard about the book study, he told me, I met with John that summer, and John encouraged my mom and I to pursue a new idea to develop a school garden path at the elementary school where she taught—the "Liberty Hyde Bailey Interpretive Garden Path," as its donated wooden sign now proudly proclaims.

The next summer I came on as volunteer intern to do fieldwork for my MFA program. Then the next summer I took the other paid position, curator, despite my lack of museum experience. By that point I had read Bailey's seven-book series, *The Background Books*, as well as one of his two biographies from the '50s; I had visited Cornell University to probe their Bailey archives; and I had written a couple grad school essays in lit classes about Bailey. I came to the museum that summer to find one of those essays, which I had emailed to John and to the head of the museum board, the glowing Anne Long (long-time South Havenite and former resident of the old Chatfield homestead, where the Baileys' hired hand Henry Chatfield grew up), printed off and stapled in one of the display cases. I took it out and later showed it to Anne. She smiled and said it was there as a place-holder, and she looked at me in that way she sometimes does—excited, expectant, her cheeks rising nearly to graze her big-lensed and too-dark transition sunglasses.

Depending on the day, I either revel in or worry about that look. South Haven is a place where I know now that I can carve out a niche and feel special—but what do Anne, or Esther Hanson, or any of the others in the band of wonderful old ladies on the Bailey board really know about choosing an area of academic study, about publishing an article in *Interdisciplinary Studies*

in Literature and Environment? It may sound meaningless to them, but then they do assume it's actually significant, that it must mean quite a lot within "academe"—but I wonder if their first reaction is actually more appropriate? I had two professors each donate a hundred bucks to help get me from central Iowa to Cornell's archives as a poor grad student. Why did they do that?

Unpaid intern to "Associate Curator," a made-up third position John made up to get me on staff when his wife found another person with more museum experience also interested in the curator opening, a part-time seasonal job to somewhat financially justify my summer's obsessing.

Lauren knew museums and how to construct a display—I knew Bailey and how to write a story. We arrived at the museum several weeks before John got off from teaching at Lowell Middle School, a few towns over, and dug in—moved furniture, pulled things out of storage and put others into it, tried to find a narrative. We approached the thing like we were preparing for the real thing, like once this museum opened the secret would be out and we'd have crowds, people travelling from across the country and maybe the world to tour the birth site and childhood home of the Father of Modern Horticulture, the prophet of the science-spirit, the poet of wind and weather.

And, within a year, associate curator to "Co-Director"—John, the first and only director of the Bailey Museum who had been with it for seven years, who dreams at least one night a month about Bailey, suddenly felt so confident in Lauren and I and so sure that he had spent summers away from his kids for too long that he handed over the reins. And, trembling and in our mid-twenties, we took them.

That's the Bailey Museum for you. The beautiful thing about it is that, with all the years of turning over among volunteers and familiar local families, mostly retirees with the time to

volunteer, and suddenly a couple of well-intentioned enthusiastic kids get excited, the Board gets excited too. But the emails between Lauren and I during the off-season—she from Kalamazoo where she works multiple part-time jobs and lives with her new husband, and I from Iowa where I'm trying to teach composition and write a thesis and take classes in writing and literature and sustainable agriculture—as we try to organize summer programming, compose a request for a city budget amendment, and write our monthly directors' report—the emails glow weary on our screens.

We really want one thing, however. The Bailey home was once at the edge of town, part of the hundred-acre family farm. Now it's tucked into a corner of the South Side of town, wedged between a fitness center and the hospital, the hospital which sits right about where one of the first apple orchards in South Haven once stood, and not at all close to the downtown. The Maritime Museum, on the other hand, sits along the river on the North Side, and, despite all the typos on its wall panels, it attracts hundreds of tourists and locals every year to see its tall ship, peruse its several exhibits, and ride the historic Lindy Lou up the Black River. They have funding up the wazoo, dedicated donors, a year-round staff, and connections with museums around the state.

Our problem is getting people to even know that the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum exists and should be visited. We need to alter the town's flow of bodies, divert a stream from that paved river Phoenix to little Bailey Avenue and into the little frame house where so many of us have stumbled upon Bailey's sweet haunting.

We want to change the system of cultural landmarks that have grown here. We want to remap South Haven.

So now I'm plotting. In South Haven, in Ames, in the occasional foray into the western mountains or the northern boundary waters—in all these rooted places, I'm surfing, I'm riding an invisible wave, now and then falling off or crashing but I'm getting better. Or maybe it's not that, maybe I'm just here, like everyone else, but I'm listening for the undertones bouncing from the rocks, for the perfect pitch to really make my soundboard ring.

I don't mean to sound like this is anything special or unusual. In the evenings, I still walk through the streetlamp-lit neighborhoods of the historic district in Ames, to friends' houses to play Settlers of Catan or to make falafel from boxed mix or to stream movies through Netflix on the Burkes' TV. I live in a transient community of young adults calling themselves "creative writers," I share with them the vision of a lifestyle crafted around writing that does not come packaged with a career, and I share the nervous smile that accompanies that description. But, for the first time in some time, I feel like the me who crossed through the old ravine after speaking to everyone I knew and feeling ready to leave them, graduation robe trailing twigs and burs.

I'm smiling, writing this. I'm plotting, and I love it.

I don't know or care where I am next year. The pile of bookmarked PhD programs and internships and temp writing jobs in my Internet browser accumulates, and I simply pull out of a few more potlucks and movie nights, work late, fix my eyes. But I won't apply anywhere I don't want to be. I could get into nowhere, and then I'd be back in South Haven, lucky to have a guest bed in my parents' house, working some shit job while I figure things out. Or maybe I'd do the same thing over at my Grandpa's house in Illinois, while I still have him, while he still has the house. That wouldn't be so bad, for a little while. Isn't that what families are for?

I'm smiling because I'm plotting the resurrection of Liberty Hyde Bailey from the dead. I'm smiling because I know it's something I can do. My father once told me, when I was maybe

seven, as he sat back in his swivel office chair in the cramped booky office in the third floor of the old church tower, surrounded by stacks of mysterious papers, that if I did well in school I could do whatever I wanted with my life. I saw spacesuits, rockets, skies without atmosphere and unearthly soil. But he didn't specify that it only works once you let what-you-want-to-do be what's-in-front-of-you, once you let go of your cosmic ambitions and take to love what has been given you.

The old ladies at the museum, the green cloth-bound volumes lining my bookshelves, my parents, my high school English teacher who gave me permission to read hard books, the ravines—the places of crossing and of following—that cut through the land of my childhood, the sandy soil itself and the fruit that farmers have pulled from it, the heady forays into philosophy and the wrestling down of Thoreau and Whitman in college, those soft nights in the houses of other graduates, all the rambling discussions about futures and responsibilities and fates and this gasping sweating planet, the nights lying in bed by someone I loved to feel—afraid of birth control and afraid of children with our clothes cutting the difference—I am taking it all, now, into me—I am taking the mass of my eyes and tongue and skin and all that has passed through them: I am accepting, I am chewing it all, and I am done justifying but I am not done parsing. I have worked alone without revealing why, and I have fallen back onto my musty single mattress in the basement of the bungalow in Ames exhausted.

But my life has been planted, and the sprouts and stalks of the garden take on a sudden order. And order is in the eye of the beholder, and every beholder's an artist. Like the Potawatomi burying their sacks of syrup into the silent earth or the disintegrated ruins of the first log cabins at "Mouth o' River" before it was incorporated, every influence has been pressed deep into my soil, and for the first time I see that they are part of the grounding as much as anything.

Whether I expand my territory or not, I will dig and spade and mull around forever. There is enough territory in an acre to keep you on your toes for a lifetime. Art's in the soil as well as the muscle and mind.

“My aim,” wrote Bailey, “is the artistic expression of life.”³

Bailey, was your one regret really leaving Michigan? It's unclear in the recording, partly from the scratchiness and partly from the warble of your very old age, whether you're being painfully earnest or crotchety and sarcastic.

But then I turn to the transcripts from the local newspapers of the times you came back, came back to your hometown that claimed you so fiercely, and I have to imagine you were in love once, too. You packed the town's auditorium as you stood on that stage, the same one I'd stand on in middle school as Rooster in the musical *Annie*, and you talked about the world, about travel, about the importance of knowing a place, and about the sand hills and marshes and deep woods you remembered from your childhood, and which of them were gone. Everyone knew you had left and made your life home in a proud university town in New York. You had been to five different continents and had been alone in places where no one spoke your language. You were a celebrity, a son of the frontier who left town to become a world-renowned scientist, explorer, and acclaimed author. They wanted to hear your poetry.

“I have been asked to read some of my own stuff,” you said at the end of your address, on one of your several late-life visits back home. “Well, all of it came out of South Haven.”⁴

I write all this in the easy days of September, of soft old sweatshirts and rampant procrastination. They say my generation is supposed to experience a quarter-life crisis ahead of the midlife one—

my goal is basically to reject that. I know I'm walking through another cliché coming-of-age story, so I figure I might as well hijack the plot. My planet hurts; my society's bitter and fighting; my economy keeps stretching thinner. I'm not alone here. We (they say to define the inclusive plural—if you're one of us, you know who you are—we) want a life deeper than all this, with intention and respect and happiness. And I've only just started to find out that the undertone is all around us, everywhere, seven billion pitches humming our tunes, seven billion stones cast in the sand, casks of syrup from the woods of our lives buried, expectantly.

I'm trying to do something old on a new and different planet. But whether it's smart or not, I think I have to trust the age I feel in ravines and marshes, in the old repeated slough of lake waves. That's not just poetic bullshit—it's beauty and being comfortable naming and protecting beauty when it comes. It's not demanding spectacle or novelty; it's recognizing what's there.

We're born smack onto a map we call heritage, and it's less fair than baptism. But we're also born with fistfuls of pens, and everyone else has a map and pens too and they're reaching over and making scribbles at the same time. We can't run from it, not even with cars and planes. We don't move forward and away so much as around in crazy circles. But with every step or scoop of soil we change the earth around us—we make topography and break anticipation—we go ahead and remap.

Dear Bailey,

I wish I could just get a sense of what this town was like when you knew it.

About a year ago, I was walking downtown with my brother Ben, that little two-block stretch of two- and three-story facades, ancient facades still, some that you would recognize. The first-floor facades are mostly done over now, some of them recently re-redone to look old again (as per new development efforts on the part of the Chamber of Commerce), but if you could come back now, seventy years since your death and some ninety since your last visit, if you could just look up, up to the second and third storeys where the old brick and mortar shows (and has not been touched up), you would see the handiwork of some of the local bricklayers you once might have known, bricks almost certainly made at the old open-air brick “factory” in town, the assemblage of rickety wooden shades and mixing areas and stacks of drying brick, near the mill, where now stand the harbors for luxury boats and rows upon rows of condominiums, preserved in the photo collections and slideshows of today’s old-timer local historians.

Ben and I walked, shot the breeze in our autumn jackets and gloves, home for some holiday. The street was quiet, a late afternoon in the off-season of a tourist town, but the shops were open. We wanted to know about Ducey’s, or at least to remind ourselves of it.

There are shops in a small town that you seldom enter, that you wonder who could possibly frequent. The block closer to the lake has a few old standbys, but most of those shops change and morph with business. The block facing away from the lake, though, houses more of the old guard among South Haven businesses. Not the original businesses, of course—although MacDonald Drug Store still stands, where I spent two high school summers working, and a couple others might reach as far back—but I count as old anything that survived the 1980s.

Ducy's is such a place. The first floor is what I remember from childhood. I remember summer days walking downtown with Mom and my brothers, probably on the hunt for a Father's Day gift or something, and asking to enter Ducy's. We wouldn't have gone in actually looking for something. But the place was magic. Towers of vertical coiled rugs that would cover our old living room, the smells of mildew and dust, the ability to run the fingers over soft floors without stooping and the hundreds of hiding places. Mom might see someone she knew or recognized from church and fall to talking, and Ben, Sam, and I would make the place ours for those ten minutes.

But this day, walking with Ben, he a recent college graduate and I a grad student, it wasn't Ducy's main entrance that caught my eye. It was the open door next to it, which didn't seem to belong to any business, crammed between the front windows of Ducy's and the next store. A sign leaned against the open door, reading "Come on up!," and along the walls that flanked a stairway were goofy paintings of overweight ladies in swimsuits making kissy faces.

"We have to do this," I told Ben. He seemed slightly skeptical. But we ascended the flight of stairs and entered another world.

Whoever had painted the walls of the stairway had more paintings framed for sale. They hung on all the walls, surrounded by homemade wall clocks, glittery hangings of various kinds, knickknacks sitting on rustic porch tables that were also for sale. We were above Ducy's, possibly in a part of Ducy's we had never seen. The store stretched narrowly into the center of the block, and the rooms twisted around the central staircase in confusing ways. We must have been above the adjacent store as well, but it seemed to be all one business. Some rooms had themes—a theme of cats or a theme of fish. We found a locked door with a frosted glass

window, someone's office, vacant. The whole place was vacant. We didn't run into a single soul as we walked around, lifting things and wondering at their existence.

The owner must be independently wealthy, we said.

And there was a third floor. Up here, more rugs—it must still be Ducky's. We encountered, around a corner, a replica of a strange print we had seen on the floor below. It was a huge framed thing, a lounging lady in a black dress and hat against a black background, the whole thing looking like the colors had been cut out and pasted together and the dress and hat outlined in white, half of her dress sparkling with silver glitter, the lady gazing at the viewer with parted lips. It freaked me out at first—it was positioned at the opposite end of the stairwell that the one a floor below it was placed, giving the impression that I had just walked up the stairs to find the same floor presented in reverse—but I jogged back down the steps to check, and the duplicate was still down there. She hadn't followed us up.

We came into a room with a high, dark ceiling, and no lights on. We flipped a switch beside the door, and lights far above us clattered to life. The space was still dimly lit, with columns of wrapped carpets ringing the space. The floor was wooden and the walls were exposed brick and mortar—ancient brick and mortar, from the old brickyard. A row of tall windows, reaching nearly to the ceiling, spanned the wall that faced the street. Looking down we could see the main drag like we never had, the familiar first-floor facades of our childhood suddenly appearing squat, as if embarrassed, glancing up at us from under their stuck-out brows, their roofs exposed. The buildings across the street were only two storeys tall, and we could see treetops and the rooftops of houses beyond them. We could almost see Lake Michigan way off to the extreme right, if we squashed our faces against the glass. I was doing that when Ben

laughed and pulled one of the wheeled carpet carts out of the way. “Look!” He had found another copy of the creepy lady print.

And just on the other side of one of the walls of carpet rolls was a big open space. It hadn’t been touched up in decades, maybe in half a century, maybe longer. Rolls of carpets lay on the ground, forming a sort of miniature barricade, and an absolute clutter of stuff covered the part of the ground that we could see in the angle of light that we let in. Dust hung in the air as we breathed into that space—that space that was used for nothing but storage, that few people in this town had likely ever seen despite its great view of the street below and the town beyond.

“This would be such a sweet apartment,” Ben said.

I agreed. “I wonder if they’d be willing to rent the space out for stuff,” I suggested. “You know, like a little theater for poetry reading or music.” It could be a complementary space to the one real theater in town, Foundry Hall. Maybe it would generate excitement about a South Haven arts scene. I had heard that the town once boasted such a scene, back in the day, some hundred years ago, when the tourism industry was picking up for the first time and folks from Chicago were just paying attention. Back when people were interested in settling in small towns.

Bailey, did you ever stand in that room, touch those walls? What was the place used for back then? Did you too see promise for something grander, a future site for community gathering and the arts? You loved the arts.

I know I’m getting fanciful—but was any of this dust, entombed here for so many years, kicked up by your own country boots?

CHAPTER THREE, BETWEEN LOVE AND DEATH

Little children love the dandelions: why may not we? Love the things at hand; and love intensely. If I were to write a motto over the gate of a garden, I should choose the remark which Socrates made as he saw the luxuries in the market. “How much there is in the world that I do not want!”

L. H. Bailey, from *Garden-Making*, 1898, p. 2

I.

There are many good reasons to leave South Haven and never turn back.

This might surprise you if you’ve read any of the literature that’s been published on South Haven’s history. Local historian and retired Chicago-area teacher Bea Kraus, whose books *A Time to Remember*, *A Place to Remember*, and the “third volume of the South Haven trilogy” *A Time and a Place Revisited*, does a great job bringing together interesting stories but ends every book with a sunny optimism that sounds to me like the optimism that only a part-year resident could bring. Even the collections of local photography and history published by the late Richard Appleyard, venerable local photographer whose family has actually lived in South Haven and continued their heritage of local photography over several generations (despite the closing of their shop downtown), tend to try to leave the reader with a sense of hope, although more tempered. What I see him doing—and maybe Kraus too—is trying to bandage the town up a bit, maybe for the strategic reason that we need that hope to make our community stronger, to get South Haven’s best and brightest to stick around and help revive the fading sense of localism that the big seasonally occupied lake houses undermine. And of course, those houses themselves symbolize the wealth that some people think we, the town, have.

As pastor at the local Peace Lutheran Church for twenty-two years, my dad has seen

some poverty. My parents both grew up in cities—Dad in Gary and Mom in Minneapolis—and their passion was serving the urban poor. I lived my first four years in a row house in Jersey City in a Puerto Rican neighborhood where my nickname was Gerber Baby for the paleness of my skin, across the street from a crack house and a vacant lot where New York manufacturers dumped toxic waste. Dad served at a Lutheran church in town while spearheading a project to get the local Barrow Mansion recognized as a National Historic Place and restored for use as a homeless shelter, and Mom stayed at home and began to think about returning to college to study education. They couldn't afford the private schools in Jersey and couldn't bring themselves to send us to the public schools there, so Dad looked for a new call somewhere closer to his family. In addition to a place near Gary, that great Rust Belt city on the south coast of Lake Michigan, another congregation attracted his eye—one in a similar ecological environment on the Lake, and also a similar economic environment. That was 1992—in that year, Van Buren County was the second poorest county per capita in the lower peninsula of Michigan. The second-poorest in 1992, and even then the long lakeshore stretched on with miles and miles of luxurious summer-home mansions. And there, in the small town of South Haven along the lakeshore, a Lutheran church was looking for a pastor.

I'm not sure exactly why Dad looked at South Haven in the first place, but I'm guessing that he was attracted to some of the very elements that continue to drive those with means to leave. And now I'm in Iowa, at the end of a graduate degree program, looking around not knowing where to go, and I can't get South Haven off my mind.

The Grand Rapids skyline emerges from a tangle of roadside weeds, box-store sprawl, and patches of trees like a handful of blocky fingers pushing through the soft membrane of west

Michigan's sandy soil. We rumble along in Dad's slick new Honda Pilot, the five of us, as if we had never separated. Dad and Mom sit pilot and co-pilot, Ben and I in the middle, I with my ankles crossed below the right-side seat and Ben spread over the left and center, and Sam in the back right where the leg room is most cramped as if he were still the smallest, as if we didn't all know that I'm smallest now.

The drive should last just about 45 minutes from South Haven at Dad's speed, but we might as well be headed all the way to the Rocky Mountains in the mid '90s—the scene has become so familiar and adaptable. I'm unaccountably sleepy, and not sure how close we are. I slept well last night, but haven't been able to focus on the book I brought along. The thing I remember seeing before dozing last was a colony of seagulls in flight, far above the highway, and the surrounding scraggle of winter trees, bare and not yet snow-covered.

Ben is frustrated. He has wedged his back into the corner of seat and door, arms crossed, hood up, and his legs down to the knees lie over the middle seat. He's at least half-asleep, but volatile—he didn't sleep at all last night, played bass at a gig downtown (he's a drummer, but the gig was mostly for fun) and then joined friends to hike the dunes at North Point just outside of town. He apparently left the group without anyone noticing while they were at the beach, and walked the full couple miles along the shore of Lake Michigan back to town. Our parents weren't pleased—in several places along that shoreline the sand beach gives way to huge slabs of jagged riprap, and it's nearly impossible to stay above the water the whole way, so it's not the best route to take a stroll by yourself in the mid-December dark—but Ben would later tell me it was the first time since his early graduation on the 18th that he could wrap his mind around what he was doing with his life.

Despite the date, the fact that he walked that length of beach the day after Christmas, the

wind coming from the west, from that black night-void where vast freshwater sea supposedly meets cloud-inked sky, it wasn't too bitterly cold. It's been unseasonably warm this year. It's not unusual for the ground to be exposed in December, but the fact that we haven't had a single sticking snow all winter has me worried. Regardless, I imagine Ben striking out across the shoreline, all the memories that must have cycled through his mind, and I'm glad for the lake's unseasonable hospitality.

But now he's here. He got an hour's nap this afternoon, but the five of us have been together most of the day since Ben arrived a little late for morning doughnuts. It's Sam's birthday, and we're heading to Grand Rapids, the closest town that's showing the movie he wants to see.

Anyway, the skyline has emerged, and Mom and Dad scan the right side of the highway. "It should be right around here," Dad says. "She ran against the rail on the right side." I'm peering forward as well. Then we see it: a long indented section of guardrail, the indentation digging deeper to its culmination in a frayed streak of cherry-red. The color of Clarissa Lund's car.

When you grow up in a small town and your father serves as pastor to one of the town's largest congregations, you hear about deaths. Most of them don't affect you much. You sit down to dinner one night, and after the prayer and the initial small talk, Dad will mention that So-and-So with a familiar last name just died. Mom will figure out, usually through a series of questions, how the person is related to someone she has taught in school or someone in the congregation, or conclude that she doesn't know the person either. Dad averages about a funeral a month. Many

have little if any connection to the church, but our congregation has a reputation in town for welcoming everybody and anybody, so we can be the go-to place for folks without a regular church home.

For the ones that do affect you, you're typically one of the first people in town to find out. Dinnertime announcements range from the spontaneous, out-of-nowhere "well-that-just-happened" unpredictability on the one hand, to the obvious-before-spoken, the ones where Dad has just gotten out of a meeting with a wrecked family and walks in the door with a sigh as he slings his overcoat onto a hanger, and everyone in the living room at that moment waits for him to announce who died. This was the case the day Jordan's grandma Nettie Boersma found her husband Lorence in the living room with a pistol, his blood and brains spattered over the living room wall. Police in these situations will usually ask the family member if there is a pastor or close friend they can call. They try not to leave the living alone until someone has come to be with them. Dad got the call and drove straight to the Boersmas', a place he knew, to find Nettie calm but unable to articulate what had happened, in shock. Dad sat with her, asked her how she was doing, and got her to a safer space where she could stay with family while a hazmat team came to clean and gut the blasted room. And, of course, Dad saw Lorence. He will shake his head and stare into space when the story comes up, which is seldom. "No one should ever have to see that," he'll say. He's seen that several times too many.

Dad told us all this, of course. There are things pastors don't tell their families, ideally, but sometimes we hear more than people probably think. We also learn how to keep secrets, and when. Pastors are not inexhaustible grief sponges, and the Boersmas are part of a major community family with many branches in South Haven. Jordan, their grandson, went through most of Sunday school with me, and we sang in the school choirs together through middle and

high school. He and Troy Henderson and I formed the self-proclaimed Three Musketeers (or Stooges, depending on the day) at all church youth events, irreverent and silly and edgy. They became my first friends when my family moved from Jersey City when I was four, making them my oldest friends and me the second-oldest friend to each of them.

I don't see either of them much anymore, but we retain that loyalty to each other. These days, Jordan and Troy work together in the same factory a half hour from South Haven in Holland. When I'm with them I feel a little like a traitor against my town—I, the one who left the state to go to a private four-year university in Indiana, who graduated and, rather than return, skipped another state for grad school in Iowa—and yet, when I recently posted plans to drive to South Haven for winter break on Facebook, Jordan replied within an hour, “Let me know when u wanna grab a drink!” A couple days later we sat in the pool room at the Perch, Jordan with a Bud and me with an IPA, along with a small crew of old friends, a couple of whom I hadn't seen since graduation and a couple that were new old faces. Jordan told us he worked the next morning, but he'd stay up and take a couple whiskey shots with us anyway, “because it's not often my buddy's in town.”

That was the best night of my break, hands down, but I won't pretend that something wasn't a little off. It wasn't until after I came back from the bar with my IPA, one from a Kalamazoo brewery, Bell's, that I had grown up seeing occasionally in my parents' fridge, the Two-Hearted Ale with the etching of a fish done by Kalamazoo artist Ladislav Hanka, that I noticed everyone else drinking Buds. Neil, who had become a best friend in middle and high school and then went off to college to become a teacher, offered to split a pitcher of it, and the damage was done. It just didn't seem like good form. I should have been more attentive.

But we shot some pool and some whiskey, and pretty soon the slip in manners started to

fade. Faces came and went, but Jordan, Neil, and I stuck around pretty much until closing.

The factors that led to Van Buren County's poverty in 1992, when we moved there, sound like the same old story for the Michigan Rust Belt. Like Michigan's more famous and urban example of economic collapse and poverty, Detroit, South Haven began to falter when, in the 70's and 80's, auto-related factories started declining and shutting down. National Motors and Bonn Aluminum are a couple that you might hear old-timers talk about. Even the old Everett Piano factory, the shattered-window shell of which whispered to us of hauntings when my school bus used to pass it on the way to Lincoln Elementary before it was torn down, closed during that time. Every Everett Piano in the world was made right there, and none are made today.

Today, over 60% of students in the South Haven Public Schools qualify for free or reduced hot lunch, and more than 70% of the students at Lincoln, a K-3 school that I attended, qualify. My mom, an elementary school teacher in the Public Schools for twenty years now, tends to get saddled with a high number of special-needs and at-risk kids due to her reputation for being able to work with them effectively. When I was growing up, she came home with stories practically every week about her at-risk kids who didn't have access to the resources they needed, the frustrations she worked through to get basic materials for class activities, the inability to get a bus just to visit a local museum with her class once a year.

The three big employers for our community's parents are the hospital, the public schools, and Palisades Nuclear Power Plant, which sends its plumes of vapor over the lake and dunes just five or six miles south of town, adjacent to RV-infested Van Buren State Park. And unless you have professional education or credentials, none of those—the hospital, the school system, or the nuclear plant—provide very many well-paying jobs. With most of the factories of the 70's and

80's gone, the blue collar "guarantee" that you could both grow up in South Haven and get a job in South Haven disappeared, except in the lower paying service sector that supports the tourism industry that moved in to fill the gap the factory closures left. Meanwhile, the incredible wealth along the lakeshore—nearly all of which are either condominiums or high-end part-year residencies, many from suburban Chicago who come to South Haven to get away to someplace quaint, simple, idyllic—drives property values higher and higher, and year-round locals have been either moving out into the townships surrounding town or away altogether. Luxury tourism is slowly driving away the very workforce it needs to sustain itself and the town. We love the tourists and we hate them. We invite them to our shops and fast-food joints, and we curse their terrible driving. Amid the summer sea of T-shirts bought at downtown gift shops, you'll occasionally spot the perennially enduring shibboleth, in cock-eyed scrawl, to wit: "If it's called 'tourist season,' why can't we shoot 'em?" Still, as the middle class shrinks and the working class expands, we continue to see more and more of the big luxury homes and condos rising up like specters from the sand, rising in the footprints of locals' houses that have since vanished into the dune grass.

I don't know these things because I'm a sociologist or even much of a local historian—I know them because I live in South Haven and because my parents are two major spokes of our community. I recently emailed Dad about poverty in South Haven. "I have always been amazed," he wrote back, "in my outreach and visitation how the rural poor in our area have less in the way of services than the urban poor with whom I related in other settings. Life in shacks or pieced together dwellings, without adequate utilities, etc. exist throughout our rural community, sometimes on properties between lovely homes and farmhouses. Many folks are struggling in rural Van Buren and Allegan Counties."

And at Peace Lutheran, the first decade of the new millennium brought a sharp decline in the middle class and professional families, despite the relative health of the congregation and the fact that it had grown over my dad's first decade there into one of the largest congregations in town. Many left town and even the state in search of jobs suitable to their level of training. A new population of "young retirees," professionals who manage to retire early, is on the rise at Peace, but the fading of the middle class family that so characterized the congregation I knew growing up is unmistakable. And, when I visit home over breaks, even church feels a little less like home.

So, welcome to South Haven. We're a town on the periphery. You may know us as the posh resort town where rich people from Chicago stay at their summer homes for three months of the year, the place with the beaches where college kids from Kalamazoo visit on good beach days and get ticketed ten bucks for not paying the five-buck parking fee, the amusingly self-proclaimed Blueberry Capitol of the World that hosts its annual National Blueberry Festival on the grassy knoll by the river, the quaint hamlet with the three-block downtown boasting everything from the turn-of-century bank-turned-restaurant Clementine's to the stiflingly narrow and shelf-packed Arbor Antiques to the Blueberry Store where you can buy everything from blueberry-flavored coffee to blueberry-themed tote bags. Well. You'd do well to visit us in November or March, in one of the muddy months, and take stock.

Some people apparently impose a dividing line in the middle of southern Michigan, somewhere around I-69, somewhere near or west of Lansing. A suburbanite from Farmington Heights, near Detroit, told me that west of that line, towns become gentrified, cleaner, or something. "I don't know," I remember her saying, "it gets less Rust Belt-y."

Old timers in town would cock an eyebrow at that statement. Most South Havenites know that the town has tourism roots dating to the 1920s, when two ferries a day shuttled tourists across the belly of Lake Michigan between Chicago and South Haven to enjoy the beaches, the bustling music scene, the huge dance floor that sat perched on the lakeside bluff, and the fine dining. True, we've had our good times, but South Haven gave in to the promise of the factories like everyone else, and like everyone else we were conned. The outsourcing and retreat of the auto factories decimated fewer families here than in Detroit because there were fewer of us to decimate. The rich lake homes certainly still existed, but there was little beyond the two beaches to persuade the casual vacationer to stop by, and it looked nothing like its former glory. It still doesn't. It wasn't until 1991 that the city invested a huge amount of money to purchase and renovate a strip of land near the mouth of the Black River, adjacent to the downtown, named it Riverside Park, and built a whole new marina, picnic area, festival site, and riverside walkway there. Before 1991, the strip of land separating Water Street (a couple-block off-kilter extension of the main drag that connects the downtown to the beach) from the Black River was jammed with weeds, wild. It was a bold and fiscally liberal move, but it transformed the face of South Haven and started to turn the economy around. Gravity seemed to take hold of our economic pendulum and swing it back towards tourism. The town's been transforming ever since, for better and for worse.

And that was the year, 1991, that Bob Linstrom took a call at First English Evangelical Lutheran Church, now known as Peace Lutheran, driving in from Jersey City with his two motley sons and very pregnant wife. I have never known a different South Haven. Factories in town meant to me the old Everett remains and the two or three small operational factories that we ran past in cross country practices—they seemed so ancillary. In a job-shadowing day in

middle school, I remember that all the available shadowing spots at the local newspaper office were filled, so, not knowing what else to do with a poetry-loving trumpet-playing bookworm like myself, I was sent to an auto-parts factory, one of the couple remaining. I never knew it existed—it's hidden along a back road, behind the high school sports fields and a line of trees. When my suburban-Detroit friend told me about the state's dividing line, it seemed vaguely wrong, but I did not realize just how wrong she was. We were part of her Rust Belt, a real western hinge of it. But, because a small town can get by on tourism for a little while, and because we currently are, it's a history we don't often tell.

So where do you go as a young South Haven High School graduate? Jordan wants to fight fires, and Troy wants to work on cars, but without many options in town they drive the half hour to the factory in Holland where Jordan's dad works. Nerdier guys like me continue to hide out in school.

I keep saying "we," but my until-recently not-knowing does give me pause. Insofar as I was not born South Haven, insofar as my parents and their parents were not born there, I don't think I'm quite a local; I'm still trying to understand the town in ways that other twenty-something townies seem to know by instinct. I end up delving into locally published books, musty archives at the historical society, collections of newspaper clippings from the late 1800s. The things virtually no one else in town reads. My dad didn't have to do this—he didn't even grow up there, but he's more a local than I am. At the same time, there's no place that feels more comforting in early October, in late March, in one of those brisk-gray jacket-weather months when the people you meet walking live there and probably recognize you. If not a local, I'm no tourist. Walking along the lakeshore in December, sand in my old running shoes and the pocket of my old blue high school cross country jacket, I do call myself local. But that's not

quite right. What I am is what we call a South Havenite, or just *Havenite*, and maybe the real process that has engaged me recently, working at the Bailey Museum and doing some little local history research here and there, is less a process of *localizing* than it is of *havening*. The word makes me think of a bird, skittering around town, gathering up twigs and trash from the places he knows and working them with his beak into some kind of makeshift shelter and stopping place, into something that feels, instinctually, like home.

But I don't really know if I can go back. I'm on track to become a college professor—what could I do in South Haven? I keep heading home every summer for work and to crash at my parents' house, but it seems increasingly superficial, seven years now away from home. Can I go back? I'm not even sure that I want to.

Clarissa Lund. It was the day after Christmas, and we sat around a festive collection of leftover meatballs, potato sausage, hummus, and cheese. The name did not ring a bell with me when Dad made the announcement, but Mom reacted. "Oh no—how did it happen?"

"Who's that?" Ben asked.

"Sam, you remember mowing the lawn for the Lunds' last summer?" Dad asked.

"They're the couple—really sweet, just a really sweet couple—who live just around the corner on Hubbard and who paid you way too much?"

"Oh no," Mom said, "wasn't she—"

"Their only child," Dad said, nodding. "Unmarried, no kids. Yeah. I was just over there."

I looked up her obituary later. The local funeral home, Filbrandt's, posts obituaries to their site. Very techy, you may think. Until recently, using the site required muting your

computer, or you'd have to endure the same four-bar piano refrain on repeat over and over again, playing in the background. Now you can find a tiny "stop" icon in top-right. If you click it, the words "Ambience stopped" scroll across a tiny marquee, and you probably sigh in relief. I bet whoever manages that website got pretty excited when she figured out how to make the Ambience, but I bet I also know why they had to figure out the "stop" button. Anyway, I've come to know the site well enough.

Obituaries start with what I already know. "Clarissa Meghan Lund, 54, of Grand Rapids, died Wednesday, December 28, 2011." I also know that she was on her way home after spending Christmas with her parents, and that "Wednesday" might as well read "Tuesday night." She insisted on leaving late that night so that she could get to Grand Rapids on time for work. But then the obituary begins to give this person who I never met, who for some reason makes me tear up in front of the computer screen, despite the annoying music that I have not yet "stopped," new life:

She was born March 14, 1957 to Jared and Marie Louise (Larson) Lund. Clarissa graduated from South Haven High School in 1975. She received her Master's Degree from University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. Clarissa worked at Albion Intermediate School District as a Speech Therapist. She loved the outdoors, was a world traveler and was also an avid animal lover. She is survived by her parents Jared and Marie Louise Lund of South Haven, Michigan. A visitation will be held Saturday, January 7, 2012 from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. with services beginning at 3:00 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church with Rev. Robert Linstrom officiating. Memorial contributions can be made to Mel Trotter Ministries and Liz's House in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Kindly share your thoughts and memories on the family's online guestbook at www.filbrandtffh.com.

The family is being helped by the Filbrandt Family Funeral Home of South Haven 637-0333.⁵

A native South Havenite, but an avid traveler, possibly a restless soul. Unmarried, independent, a school worker. I remember sitting in the back room during second-grade recess with the small group of fellow baby-talkers who couldn't turn an "l" or push an "r." This was someone who needed to know the physicality of language, tricks of tongue. She had a certain muscle disorder, Dad told us. It's unclear what happened in her car that night, but she was in sight of the Grand Rapids skyline when she lost control of her vehicle. She didn't crash. The car simply veered to the right of the lane, made contact with the guardrail, and scraped along it for a good piece before coming to rest. I assume her car got banged up but was far from totaled. It wouldn't have flipped or crumpled. Her cell phone showed that she attempted to make some calls while sitting there, but apparently could not get out of her car. She died sitting on the shoulder, car running. Might have been accidental mixed meds, maybe a heart attack. Clarissa Meghan Lund, 54, of Grand Rapids, died.

I'm not sure I deserve to feel as bad as I do about Clarissa's death. But despite all the deaths you get when you're a PK, some of them still touch you. Sadness seems to well up from the details like water through cracks. The day of the funeral I text Dad to get the time. He texts back and suggests that I invite Mom, but she responds that she's at the gym, and after all she didn't really know Clarissa. I want to be an insider to this story; I want to offer my condolences and to shake the hands of the parents who I do not know but would probably recognize.

I think about it for a few minutes, but decide to stay home.

There are deaths and there are deaths. I can still count the big ones of my life on my hand. My

Great-Grandma Ida Larson was the first big death, shortly after my ninth birthday. She was an industrious Swede nearly to the end, spending only the last year and a half or so of her hundred-year life in a nursing home. Right through her 98th year she lived alone in her own house, self-reliant. I thought it incredibly cool when she hit 100, although I understood her health was failing. I still rooted for her to hit 101.

She provided a strange introduction to death for me. I have to imagine my dad was one of her favorite grandkids. His most often-repeated childhood memories of visiting Grandma Larson include watching her grind meat and create meals in vast pots in the kitchen, making runs around the corner to pick up kroppkakors (Swedish meat-filled pastries) from the little house at the end of the alley, and picking up burgers from Prince Castle, a restaurant with a turreted façade a half-block from the krippkakor house. He spent a formative summer with her while he was in college, running errands and helping her around the house when he wasn't working for Pinkerton Security as a third-shift guard for Joe Capone (nephew to Al—yes, that Al—via his son). He was recovering from a major car accident at the time, and had a hard time getting jobs that he could work in a full leg brace—but I'm sure he also wanted an excuse to live with Ida and eat her food for a summer. He became disciple to her Swedish cooking, and since her death he has kept Grandma Larson's elaborate Christmas traditions especially alive.

At the age of nine, I didn't fully appreciate my dad's relationship with her. We were all seated in the living room of our house, watching *A Christmas Carol* on TV, when Dad went to answer the phone. He came back and sat down with us. When the commercials came on, he hit mute. "Well," he said softly, "Grandma has just died." A pause. "Great-grandma Larson," he explained. I think Mom said she was sorry, and I think my brothers and I echoed her, not sure what else would make sense. I looked down into my hands, but also wondered if he would

unmute when the commercials were over. Maybe we should go somewhere, I thought. I think Dad said it was alright, that we knew this was coming. When the commercials were over, he hit the volume. I remember distinctly the Ghost of Christmas Past leading Scrooge through a wall and into Fezziwig's party. The warm wooden walls of Fezziwig's house stretched to a high ceiling, and people sang from the overhanging balcony and danced on the floor to live music. Old Scrooge watched onscreen and smiled, his heart melting, while Mom held Dad's hand in our living room.

Keep watching, I thought to myself. That's what Dad wants us to do.

* * *

II.

Clarissa is not the only person I'm thinking of as we approach Grand Rapids the day after her death, Sam's birthday. I can't drive this route lately without thinking about Amy.

I did not date in college—not for more than a month, once. Heidi James hailed from St. Olaf College, and we met studying abroad through the Center for Global Education in Namibia one fall. It was a good fling, romantic, unexpected. Memories include nights sitting on the roof of a hostel in Cape Town, South Africa, a bottle of wine without glasses, Table Mountain illuminated against the starry sky behind us. Exotic. We were Midwesterners, vaguely Lutheran, understood each other in certain ways, but met and knew each other in a context we did not fully understand. We held hands in kombi buses that rattled through ramshackle informal settlements, we sipped Irish coffee with cheesecake at downtown bars where the walls were covered in local artwork and poetry, we went to the aquarium thirty minutes before closing and stood in awe under a tank of sharks and rays.

When Heidi returned to St. Olaf in December, she quickly began dating a guy whose actual name *was* Olaf, to my chagrin, and communication generally petered after that.

Otherwise I led a relatively unromantic life during those years, which fit my crammed schedule pretty well. This stood in stark contrast with my high school career, marked as it was by five flings over the four years. A pretty good run for a nerdy chorister who sat his middle school lunches out at a six-top table of four. In a high school like South Haven's, you're either dating someone or you're not—we didn't do the whole pre-dating thing that I've heard about from a couple East Coast friends, where you're somehow holding hands and giving extensive backrubs and who knows what else before you'd even start to consider yourself a couple—unless

you're either rich or popular, and thereby self-confident, you can't get away with such things. At least that was roughly how my perception handled the romantic landscape at the time. We South Havenites loved modestly but earnestly; we ached for companionship more than for experience.

It's amazing—sometimes disturbing—the way small-town romance can engulf you.

I lived deep in the crush-phase when I wasn't dating in high school—those years are a haze of girls shifting as through fog in various states of relationality to me—one month, for example, Emily Verdonk stands far off in the haze, a newbie of Catholic schooling who didn't want to leave town for high school and therefore ended up with us, a flautist in band, cute and apparently funny, but distant; but then the next week she's made friends with Neil, our sole French horn player and one of my best friends, and suddenly *wham*: there she is, suddenly at the front of the mist, material. Similar sense of humor, musically inclined, quirky in a way that fits our lunch table's protocol. We dated for about three weeks—I asked her out, she dumped me after two weeks, then asked me back out a week later, and I dumped her back a week after that. It was a terribly depressing time. Still, we came out even, and we became the kind of friends who are quick to snap at each other and argue and hurt each other's feelings, but who almost without fail let each other know when they're going to be in town. We've been labeled "frenemies."

I loved the excitement of the high school romantic haze. You never knew when someone you adored would move from the background to the fore. One minute it would seem like the whole world had become invisible (more accurately: that you had become invisible to the whole world), and then out of nowhere there'd be a hand on your shoulder or a snowball square to your face. High school was like coming out for me, but instead of coming out as gay, it was like I came out as interesting. Courtney Burrows, an energetic and down-to-earth senior girl who everyone loved, asked me out my freshman year. This made waves. It was a choir relationship,

as would be all the subsequent relationships I'd engage in through high school. And it changed me. I had always craved romances, and once I started having them, I realized I loved having them. I hated them ending, but I loved getting into them.

Throughout my dating career in South Haven, however, one person remained in the background, elusive. But when, the summer after I graduated college, she started stopping by the parking lot where Emily Verdonk (yes, the same), Neil, and I were working writing parking tickets for the city, Amy became suddenly, flabbergastingly present in the old haze.

In second grade, Amy and I took piano lessons from the same teacher. We always performed at the same level at the regional Student Achievement Tests, and we'd often play back-to-back at the studio recitals, which were basically ordered on the philosophy that the least experienced kids were the easiest acts to follow. She went to Catholic school, so we never saw each other at recess. I do remember feeling vaguely shy around her back then, but wanting badly for her to break the ice. I remember at a young age being struck by her olive skin, dark hair, and soft brown eyes. She was awfully pretty, even then.

She started playing oboe when band started in fifth grade. I was first or second chair trumpet through middle school, and situated at the opposite end of the band room. Occasionally I admired her from a distance, thought that whatever she was whispering to the clarinets was probably really funny, but she seldom acknowledged me. There was one middle school band trip during which I recall falling completely head-over-heels for her, to the point of confessing the obsession to Neil, without a clear reason. I had simply always had a crush on Amy. It was like rediscovering her, and she still seemed like an incredibly kind, funny, gracious person. But then, at the end of the trip or maybe the end of marching season, the feeling passed as easily and mysteriously as it had arrived. There was no explaining it; liking Amy was part of who I was, as

natural and ingrained as the route to school. She was like what Robert Fripp says of King Crimson: “When music appears, which only King Crimson can play then, sooner or later, King Crimson appears to play the music.” For Amy, it was like a void would appear, or one that I didn’t know I had would show itself, and Amy would appear to fill the void.

I don’t mean to blow this out of proportion. Ultimately, Amy and I vacillated between acquaintances and casual friends. But I do go through spates of longing, and that would create weird tensions. And I’m sure that short spate of intense crushing in middle school drew energy from the two summers spent in middle school sailing lessons. If you hear “sailing lessons” and think “bourgeois,” right on. But that was what I wanted to do for those two weeks of my summers for a couple years, and my parents are of the ilk that sometimes spends too much of their own dough to provide their kids with “experiential education.” Anyway, I wasn’t quite socially adept enough to pick up on the somewhat elitist vibe of the South Haven Yacht Club, with its upstairs restaurant and bar for members and their guests only and its tackily massive mariner-themed ornaments and its private boat slips on the river. But tooling around in that river, in tiny rectangular one-and-a-half-person boats called Optimists (which anyone who’d take them out on the lake would have to be), I thought I had captured the essence of Amy. She started a year before me and was more experienced, but I caught on, and soon we were the two most experienced sailors in the class. That meant that, when we weren’t in our own boats, we were afforded ample opportunities to share one—and that meant lots of practicing jokes, chasing ducks, and bumping knees as we tried to dodge the low-swinging boom and maneuver the little boxes into patterns that spoke vaguely of grace. I began to associate Amy with summer in South Haven. She was sand in the hair, bare toes, a splash of water from behind. She was so damn *cool*.

Still, at the end of the day, I was an inward, shy kid. I couldn't drive, and I was a child of my generation, not my parents'. Summer flings were not easy or natural. I did not simply wander town in the day without a plan that my parents had approved. I returned home, sunburnt and high on breezes, sat down to family dinner, and occupied myself.

"Do you want to just walk around for a while?" Ben asked. I said yes, of course, but I couldn't bring myself at first to say why.

Our reasons for visiting old Lakeview Cemetery had been whimsical enough. I had asked Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum director John Stempien on a whim if I could spend the night in the old house, maybe in Bailey's childhood bedroom. John, always excited for me to be excited, responded with a more unqualified yes than I had actually expected. I brought it up over the dinner table, mentioning that despite being geeked I was also a little nervous, and Ben immediately volunteered to go along. "Really?" I asked.

"Could be fun. Maybe we'll get haunted." He smiled, and I knew we'd make this into a good time.

So on the 29th, Ben and I decided to make a day of it. We'd stop by the cemetery in the day, where Bailey's parents and one brother were buried, and hopefully by proximity we'd stir up enough of the old Bailey family's juju to get us some good haunting at the museum that night. I visited the museum a couple days before and got directions from the museum board chair, Anne Long, who also expressed her excitement that we'd be trying to channel a little Bailey. The whole project carried an air of mock-reverence mixed with legitimate reverence, a childlike silliness that no one challenged. I was glad that Ben would be there to help make it an event. By the time I left home for college, Ben and I had drifted emotionally from each other, and part of

our college experience had been a slow process of reconnection as we both matured a bit and went through some larger family crises together. Ben's temperament can be bristly, and I know better than to try to force bonding time on him, but when he initiates, I try to make it work. And it's the playful mock-seriousness that we're probably best at. The night at the Baileys' would be a natural fit.

Like the children of so many families, the Bailey boys left South Haven, and the cemetery had only four of the family's graves. We found them easily enough, near the front of the cemetery, up at the top of a slope overlooking Bailey Avenue, although a mile or so from the Bailey homestead museum, also on Bailey Avenue. Dana Bailey, eldest son, died first of scarlet fever in 1861 at the age of fifteen. His gravestone is modest, standing about knee-high. Just a year later the family's matriarch, Sarah Bailey, died of diphtheria and was buried beside her son. That was when young Liberty was four years old. Her grave stands out: it's a large marble rectangle, about five feet tall. At the top are two joined hands, with a stage curtain pulled back on either side of them. Her name was carved large, and in italics below it, a verse of half-eroded poetry that Ben and I couldn't fully make out. I knew from working at the Bailey Museum that Sarah wrote poetry, and wondered if the verse was hers, but we later found identical gravestones for other people throughout the old part of the cemetery. Apparently her gravestone had fallen at some point and broken in half; the cemetery people had done their best to set it in concrete and right it again, but it looks shoddy. Only the front is visible, the rest covered in a layer of gray concrete. Set to the left of these two graves were two small ones matching Dana's—to the far left, L. H. Bailey Sr., father and the glue that held the family together, and between him Sarah stands the grave of his second wife, originally a distant relative by marriage who had moved in to help with household chores, Maria. In his biography of Liberty Hyde Bailey Jr.'s life, Dorf takes

care to place several pages of information between Sarah's death and the new marriage—Maria was living with them at the time of Sarah's death—but it seems that much less time actually elapsed. Young Lib, only four when Sarah died, apparently accepted Maria, although even into his nineties he could recall the experience of sitting at his mother's deathbed. The now-eldest child, Marcus Benjamin, did not. When he was old enough he left home to do electrical work in Illinois, and I'm not sure what became of him after that. Dorf writes in passing that Ben left "because of a family problem"—presumably related to the new marriage. He went by his middle name, and I wonder if Ben Bailey shared a similar short temper with my middle brother Ben. Liberty Jr. lies in Ithaca, New York, the town that became his home through most of his adult life.

In addition to overlooking their own road, the Bailey graves face Celery Pond, one of the few remaining wetland lakes in the area, and beyond it Lake Michigan, invisible through the trees. After spending some time standing and crouching in the cold, trying to read Sarah's poem, Ben made the offer to walk around a bit. And I figured it was because of Ian.

Ben has known death much more closely than I have ever had to. Several of his friends have died after overdosing, each from prescription drugs. I've seen him come close to tears when making arguments for the legalization of medical marijuana, and I know that part of his passion stems from the absolute ignorance or arrogance at play when a generally harmless narcotic is banned by the same government that supports the massively lucrative sale of Methadone and Oxycodone.

Then, several years ago, Brandon Silverlight, Ben's first percussion instructor and the guy who first inspired the love of music that would take him through college to graduate auditions this year, was brutally murdered by a couple who held some kind of personal vendetta

against him. Ben was at that time studying jazz percussion in the University of Michigan's competitive Jazz and Contemplative Studies program. Brandon was the guy Ben hoped would hear him play his senior recital, who he hoped would remain a friend and colleague throughout their professional lives. He was a few years older than me, and I remember him mainly as one of those guys in marching band whom you don't get in front of. He led the drum line passionately, as Ben later would. He was a "band kid" through and through, and when he was in high school you could almost always find him in the practice rooms, hammering away, learning a new piece of music for solo snare or drum kit.

Brandon's body was found against a tree out in the country, burned beyond recognition, with his burnt-out car sitting nearby. At the funeral, Ben helped lead a drum line of South Haven students and alums play one of Brandon's cadences. We cried as our chests reverberated with the bass drums.

But the first really tragic, completely unexpected death was Ian. I knew Ian through choir, chorale, band, and theater—you might as easily have known him from the swim team, football team, or for his top-notch academic reputation. He was like Ben in that everyone loved him at school, but Ian also somehow seemed to be on the inside circle of everyone's friend group, whereas Ben drifted, generally detached from cliques. Ian was famous for his T-shirts, one of the more memorable reading "hello handsome" in reverse, a mirror-image. He was sly and quick-witted and got along great with the percussionists in band, although I could tell he and Ben appreciated each other in part because they were more laid-back than the rowdier guys. They were in the midst of learning a percussion duet for Solo and Ensemble Festival when, one morning, the students at South Haven High School were informed that Ian had died in a car accident on icy roads on his way to school. Everyone descended on the choir and band rooms

and the pool area. I was a freshman in college and found out early that morning, after checking my cell phone's voicemail in my dorm room at Valparaiso. I could tell, from Dad's voice, that someone had died. I remember looking out my window at the tops of autumn-tinted trees as he told me, minutes later after I called back, what had happened. He was just on his way to the high school to meet and talk with the kids there.

Ben and I had both been to Ian's grave at Lakeview Cemetery, although Ben hadn't since the graveside service five years prior. We wandered around, keeping track of our progress by where we had left tracks in the thin layer of snow that had fallen the day before. I could remember roughly the gravestone's size and color, and Ben thought he knew about where it was in relation to an outbuilding. I tried calling Jordan, who along with Troy had been good friends with Ian, but after an hour or so we left without finding it. We agreed to come back sometime with someone who knew exactly where it was.

I love going through litanies of past relationships and hearing other peoples'. I wonder, though, if this is a symptom of being twenty-four. I've noticed that it makes for good conversation with peers, more so with peers of a feminine disposition. But I think that's just because they tend to be more honest about such things than the more masculine folks. In this theory, I'd locate myself as pretty androgynous. I'd much rather engage in a multi-hour conversation with a platonic female friend than spend five minutes discussing sports or cars or even video games (the latter of which I do have some opinions about) with other guys. I'm a big fan of sunsets, monarch butterflies, and spotting rainbows, but some of my fondest childhood memories are of romping around in the muddy ravine behind the old parsonage in search of worms and slugs (which, let's be honest, I would still kind of like an excuse to do from time to time). And I really

love seeing people on America's Funniest Home Videos lose their balance on a makeshift balancing beam while doing house repair and land straight where it hurts. Freud would probably have a field day with me. For a brief period in college, while taking a seminar class called "Perplexities of Personal Love" offered by the honors college's Kierkegaard professor, I wondered if I were really a gay woman, probably a tomboy, trapped in a man's body. (This was a poor choice of conversation topic to bring up on the rooftop in Cape Town with Heidi.) I didn't mind the tentative realization, because it basically granted permission to embrace my masculine side while asserting my equal right to butterflies. But I also figured it would just be easier to say "sensitive heterosexual." In general, though, I choose not to advertise myself under either of these banners. People will get the idea.

At any rate, whether or not they talk about it with the endurance and enthusiasm that I do, it seems like most people my age who I've known since leaving high school want to know, at least in the back of their minds, about each other's romantic history. In part, we're wondering what went wrong. We're always analyzing each other against our own experiences, changing our theories to match what we see in other people's stories and what we experience "in the field." We're at the age that we're supposed to be thinking a little more long-term. For a solid year and a half in grad school, my aunt Heather asked me every time I saw her about my girlfriend Rachael and whether she'd be hearing wedding bells anytime soon. It was cute, but also a little terrifying.

I know that this experience is pretty universal, that it has been for generations, but our world is still different. No one I know is getting professional jobs out of college, and no college grads are staying in the same place for long. My friends who have stayed close to home figure that we travelling students, now in grad schools or internships, who left them, have better

prospects for finding mates, whereas we travelling grad students and anxious unpaid interns figure that the folks who stuck to the place and people they knew and who have committed at least presently to a hometown have a better chance to focus on the whole mating thing while our worlds spin madly out of control. Of course, both parties are both wrong and right. When job prospects suck, mating prospects suck too. Some people get desperate and start having babies before they can afford the diapers or the marriage. Others get desperate and start to wonder whether they're just not meant to end up with someone permanently. Each relationship that passes marks another love interest that didn't work out—and the blank stretches between them don't exactly bolster the self-confidence.

I wonder, though, if there will come a time in our lives when the lists of deaths begin to *psychically* outweigh the romance litanies. Probably. If so, I imagine it could become even more overwhelming, because right now I can list my life's significant deaths in order like I can my romances. But in twenty, thirty, fifty years, who knows. My memory's not so hot as it is.

The rest of the day progressed in the way that so many of my Bailey days mysteriously do—with amazing *synchronicity*. Ben had introduced the word to me when I visited his college apartment a month before. Leaving a bar, he turned to his friend and said “Dude, that guy at the bar looks exactly like that Jake you got in an argument with last time we were here.” His friend went back into the bar and returned, reporting that Ben was right. Ben shook his head and smiled.

“Synchronicity.”

He had said it several times that day, and although I had generally accepted the term, I asked him what he meant. “I mean, it's just that,” he said. “Coincidences that are too crazy to explain.” I told him those were called *coincidences*. He laughed. “Whatever. Once you start to

see them, they're everywhere."

I don't buy it. Didn't. I became a little less sure of my skepticism as our Bailey day progressed. After the cemetery, we stopped by the Masonic Temple, an old brick building that sports in its basement the ratty Murphy's Mall Antiques. Ben was into Masons lately, and when I told him that Bailey's father had founded the Masonic Lodge in South Haven, naming it "Star of the Lake Lodge," we couldn't stop joking about it. We had both been past the Masonic Temple's door a hundred times on our way into Murphy's Mall, and had frequently tried the door, which was always locked. Because we were going to spend the night at the museum, however, we stopped by just to try it—and lo! It was open! We ascended the stairway quietly after reading a plaque that proudly listed names of famous Masons (George Washington, Neil Armstrong, etc.), and we weren't walking around long before the secretary came out of his office to meet us. While I chatted with him, Ben wandered around the big meeting room, with its vast wall mural of a skyscape with an eye watching the room from the middle of the sky, set behind a throne with a podium and gavel. I half-expected him to start moving things around and playing with them behind the secretary's back, but I think he was too geeked-out to touch anything. There were more portraits of Bailey Sr. than I had ever seen, considering Jr. tends to be the celebrated one. The Masons evidently had a different view. Four or five portraits hung from various walls, and then the secretary showed me a stack of portraits that they planned to loan to the Bailey Museum along with a couple thick Masonic books from Bailey Sr.'s library. I had also heard that they owned a gavel crafted by Bailey Sr. from one of the apple trees in his orchard, and asked the secretary if we could see it. Turned out the place was full of gavels, more than I had seen in my life—in order to locate the famous one, the secretary had to walk around and check the ones that were lying out (probably ten; I hadn't seen them before), opened a few

drawers that had loose gavels banging around, pulled out two shoeboxes with gavels in them, and finally concluded that one of the ones in a glass display in the lounge area was probably Bailey's. Its cylindrical head still had the bark on it, polished, evidently the work of someone who cared about the tree it came from. The guy took it out and put it in our hands.

Synchronicity.

Later that evening and before our night at the Baileys' I met with the Historical Association of South Haven (acronym, HASH—I think they're blissfully ignorant of any funny connotations) for the first time. My friend Neil's mom hooked me up; they meet once a week in a former four-room schoolhouse just around the corner from my parents to wade through and try to organize piles of paper artifacts from South Haven's history. Neil actually went to school there, from kindergarten through third grade. The head honcho, Sue, showed me around the whole place, and at one point I stopped her in a narrow corridor that had been the back room of a classroom, now one of many places of storage for things they didn't yet know what to do with. Crammed bookshelves lined one long wall, and boxes of books lined the bookshelves. I pointed to a shelf holding four tall stacks of thick old hardcovers.

"Are those the proceedings of the Michigan Horticultural Society?" I asked.

"Have you heard of them? We just got these and almost threw them out. I have no idea what to do with them."

I asked to make a phone call. John Stempien flipped out. That night when Ben and I arrived at the Bailey Museum, we unloaded stacks and stacks of the proceedings of the Michigan Horticultural Association, of which the museum previously owned only nine. Bailey's first published essay appeared in volume three, 1873, when he was fifteen. Titled "Birds," it takes Michigan farmers to task for their treatment of birds as pests, noting that certain species actually

eat insect pests and thus serve as an aid to crops. He lists off various common birds by category—herbivorous, carnivorous, and insect-eating—concludes the two-page article with a note of praise for the joy of birdsong, and then ends with a six-stanza original poem. Typical Bailey—I laughed when I first read it in the museum’s library. The books also offer great historical context for what was going on in the world of Michigan horticulture at that time, and with the new additions the museum’s collection now spans from Bailey’s teenage years right through the publication of some of his most significant works. Our originally nine-volume collection now spans nearly every year from the society’s first year, 1871, to 1925.

And that was my first visit to the HASH stronghold. Laughing about the incident with John on the phone later, he used Ben’s word. Synchronicity for him is a Jungian term, having to do with the collective unconscious. He spoke of it in all seriousness. Certain people, he told me, are more and less sensitive to the collective unconscious, and if they are open enough they can enter into channels of experience guided by that collected mass of human experience and memory—which is presumably a cool thing, given that you’ve got a bigger slice than normal of human experience guiding you as if from behind a curtain in the background. “I mean, think about how crazy this is,” he said. “Anyone else—and I mean anyone—would have walked right by those stacks of books. You were in the right place at the right time. And to think—a couple summers ago, when you and your mom came and met with Anne and I, and we gave you the go-ahead for the garden path, we could have shut it down. If it had been any other two people working, they might have been negative, and you wouldn’t have looked for an internship with us, and you wouldn’t know what the heck the Horticultural Society is—”

“Synchronicity, I guess,” I said.

“Synchronicity.”

Amy had a baby. When her Facebook profile picture became a fetal sonogram during my second summer working at the marina, I fumed.

We had met the father the previous summer when he would visit Amy from Grand Rapids. Something seemed off about them. Everyone working at the marina loved Amy, which made sense to me. She was in her element, and I loved being around her there, especially the early mornings when we were both scheduled for morning shifts. Swallows dive-bombed us as we'd walk the docks at seven, she in a fleece and I in my old cross country sweatshirt, checking off occupied slips on the roster while the sun slanted over the town's rooftops to the east. We did things together that we could have done alone, and joked over the walkie-talkies when we didn't.

We got along. She showed me how to evade our boss. South Haven rents slips in three different municipal marinas along the front end of the river, which makes for plenty of opportunities to go pretend to work elsewhere. I remember the evening we spent an hour—on the clock!—sitting on a bench on the docks, back behind the giant warehouse of All Seasons Marine, watching the river reflect the sun. We discussed her favorite sailboat, considered its contours and qualities, the nobility of its exposed wood hull. She said she liked the name, too: *Serenity*. I told her I thought it sounded overwrought, the scattered half-light catching in my glasses. We were just like those yellow chips on the water, that summer—dispersed, flowing, but held in by docks, surrounded by new boats every weekend that had sailed from anywhere on the Great Lakes. And because we were held, we really *knew* the place; because we were held, we thought we'd go anywhere next. How honest two students become in their old hometown, on quiet water, scattering their most secret aspirations over the ears of turtles, salmon, and

swallows!

Another weekday evening later in the summer, the crew of us descended upon the south side marina for pizza. Cory McDaniel, a couple years older than me and the employee with the most seniority, made the schedules. Some days he'd schedule a very certain group of us on a very certain day, one that he knew our boss might think would get busy but that he knew wouldn't. Cory ran the place, knew the job inside and out after some six or seven years at the marina, through high school and after. He dealt with disgruntled boaters without mercy and unassailably, poker-faced, knew every answer before he said it. He hid secret intentions from our boss masterfully. Most of the rest of us could tell which nights would be pizza nights just by looking at the work schedule. Once we had finished the bulk of the day's work, we'd order pizza to the south side, and that's where we'd spend the best hours of the shift. That night, Amy brought her boyfriend.

Cory and I discussed him afterward, when Amy wasn't around. The way he stared at her too much, touched her too constantly. We both felt protective of her. But when the next summer rolled around and Amy wasn't working with us anymore, it had become a moot point. She visited every once in a while, baby in carrier as well as and boyfriend in tow now, and told us how much she missed the marina, all of us. After she'd leave, the whole thing might come up in conversation again, maybe between Cory and I, but the conversation wouldn't go much further than "that's so bizarre." "Yeah." "Yeah."

She had left our world, left the marina, and entered the bizarre alternate universe of young parenthood. We missed the lightness she brought to the job, but it was pointless to dwell on. She had moved beyond our reach, officially beyond mine. It was just another example of the continuing South Haven post-high school diaspora. I tried not to think about her.

That was my last summer at the marina.

* * *

III.

I don't know about the whole collective unconscious thing. I've gotten in deep with the Bailey people, but it was through following leads, taking advice, and letting myself fall in love. With a fifty-years-dead gardener with a lopsided face, no less.

Maybe part of my Bailey obsession stems from the fact that Bailey himself seemed to do the same thing—he deliberately followed the things he loved, and *that* was how he achieved success. Actually, that probably *was* his success. I've been reading through a daily pocket journal that he kept in 1881, the year he turned twenty-three. He should have been halfway into his senior year at Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University) when the journal begins in that January, but toward the end of his junior year he had developed what biographer Dorf calls “a peculiar infirmity—a loss of balance which at times made him tip over and fall.”⁶ The tippiness was apparently serious enough that Bailey could not continue his studies, so he went to live temporarily with his brother Ben in Springfield, Illinois, where he worked as a reporter for the *Morning Monitor* and had a doctor check him out.⁷ The *Monitor* gig didn't seem to last long, and he started working as a travelling salesman for a bookstore. His entries are riddled with a couple prominent things: worry whenever he doesn't hear from his girlfriend Nettie, and dissatisfaction with the bookselling job. He records the weather obsessively, and when he's not busy he's upset.

February, Saturday 19. 1881.

Cold.
Doing nothing.

February, Sunday 27. 1881.

A blizzard again. 0 [pages] to N. L. S. Oh Dear, what can the matter be? Did not hear from her last week.

March, Thursday 3. 1881.

Letter from N. L. S. – first in two weeks, and so cold!

We get the news about the book agent job on his birthday, March 15.

March, Tuesday 15. 1881.

Last day in Springfield. I am 23. Start for Chicago, at 9 P.M. to enter on my new life—travelling book agent.

Nowhere before this do we get any mention of “travelling book agent,” and he doesn’t sound too enthused, despite his birthday. He got to travel a lot around northern Illinois and Indiana and southwest Michigan, stopping by South Haven to visit parents and friends whenever his week’s assignment took him near enough.

March, Sunday 20. 1881.

Home again! “Be it ever so humble” +c. Visit Uncle John, and receive calls from my friends. Recipient of honors.

I like to imagine what those unstated “honors” were, and where the friends met. Possibly at the local tavern. Maybe they spent a late night there, because it wasn’t often their buddy was in town. I would guess that South Havenites in those frontier days were more modest than my friends and I at the Perch taking our whiskey shots, but then again, it was the frontier. Maybe those young farmers and woodsmen partied harder than we soft-handed Havenites do today. Bailey himself, though, I know to have been a lifelong teetotaler. His father, a Mason but also something of a Puritan, strictly never imbibed, and although Bailey rejected the severity of his father’s religiosity, the abstinence from alcohol he apparently retained his whole life.

A week and a half after the South Haven visit, Bailey had the chance to make his way to the eastern part of the state, the same direction I used to head by car to visit a girlfriend, Rachael, when we would stay with parents over breaks:

March, Thursday 31. 1881.

Cold.

Went to Bath in the P.M. and x x x

[switch from pencil to pen]

Walked through the woods to get “home,” and got wet. Spent a lovely eve after 5 mos. absence.

April, Friday 1. 1881.

At Mr. Smith’s. Went, with Nettie and Mrs. Smith + Jay, down to the Lake.

Cold.

Got home at 12 midnight.

April, Saturday 2. 1881.

Cold—very cold wind.

Nettie and I went to town, then up to college.

Nettie’s remained at Sec. Baird’s, and I attended society.

April, Sunday 3. 1881.

At 3 P.M. Nettie + I started for home, Had a pleasant eve.

April, Monday 4. 1881.

Cold.

We part—again!

How sad and gloomy to me! But thus it must be for two years more.

Went to Lansing via Bath. Went to College in P.M. and remained over night.

The words “lonesome” and “gloomy” appear sporadically over the next several weeks. Just a few nights later, at the local inn in Brighton, young Bailey reports that he “took a whiskey sling and stunk all night. Feel like a fool.” Bailey! Some teetotaler. Particularly toward the end of his months as a travelling book agent, he reports often needing to spend extra time in certain towns, waiting for the money that his employer is supposed to be sending him so that he can make the rest of his trip. I wonder what he’s up to those days—any more whiskey slings? One night stuck in Waterloo he writes curiously: “In Waterloo. No money. Resting on my check. A pleasant eve.” Oh-ho? Why the double underline there? The next day he “receive[s] money at last” while in Waterloo and heads to Butler, for his connection to Chicago. Then, on Saturday, he writes:

May, Saturday 14. 1881.

Leave Butler, Ind. at 2 A.M. for Chicago. Arrive home after 2 long mos. of vagrancy.

The last word he writes larger, with some relish, or exasperation. That seems to be the end of the book agent gig; that summer he heads back to Michigan Agricultural College to complete his degree. A doctor in Springfield had drained the excess liquid from his inner ear, and his tippy malady had left. Excitement returns to his writing when back in East Lansing.

Bailey loved old books, which he notes in some of his later writing and which his biographers also stress. He has been credited with making horticulture an accepted science, not just a rural hobby and backwoods profession, and part of the excellence of his early horticultural handbooks stems from his clearly deep awareness of the gardening literature that had been written before. He writes out of experience and joy as he credits his predecessors in the first chapter of 1898's *Garden-Making*:

There has been a long and worthy procession of these handbooks,—Gardener & Hepburn, M'Mahon, Cobbett—original, pungent, ubiquitous Cobbett!—Fessenden, Bridgeman, Sayers, Buist, and a dozen more, each one a little richer because the others had been written. But even the fact that these books pass into oblivion does not deter another hand from making still another venture!⁸

One day, if we return to his 1881 journal, he felt particularly down, and his way of picking himself back up was by purchasing several “old books” for himself. They weren’t *literature*, per say, but *old books*—the same could be said for much of his own writing, and sometimes I glance at the expanding row of weathered hardcovers on my shelf (okay, it’s expanded to two shelves) and the row of L. H. Baileys along their spines and wonder if I’ve wasted a bunch of money on Abebooks.com. Some are legitimately fascinating from a philosophical point of view. Others are dictionaries of gardening terminology. Let’s call it what it is: an obsession. But I like to think that Bailey shared a similar obsession with his gardening books. It was a comfort to him, regardless of how edifying or not it was. He recognized their passage “into oblivion” and felt okay with it. I wonder why I feel so queasy with the passage of his work into oblivion—is it the

significantly broader scope and influence of his work, or a difference in character between us? Perhaps he knew better how to embrace and then let go. It did just so happen that the “old books” he loved turned out to be useful to his studies.

Or maybe it didn’t just so happen—maybe use value evolves most organically from the unfettered pursuit of our best obsessions, our deepest loves. When Bailey left Harvard University, several years after his year of bookselling and wandering, where he had been invited to study botany under the eminent Asa Gray after graduating MAC and where he had begun married life with Nettie after a five-year courtship, renowned botanist John Merle Coulter informed Bailey that he “would never be heard from again.”⁹ He had been asked to return to MAC to become the nation’s first chair in horticulture and landscape gardening, a position which to the botanists out east did not constitute a post of scientific credence. Gray himself, a longtime role model with whom Bailey must have jumped at the chance to work at Harvard, purportedly greeted the news of the young scholar’s move with surprise and disappointment. “But Mr. Bailey, I thought you were fitting yourself to be a botanist,” Bailey remembered him saying.

“Yes, Dr. Gray, but a horticulturalist ought to be a botanist.”¹⁰

That statement encapsulated a large chunk of what would become Bailey’s legacy: the development of horticulture as a recognized science. But it’s also a statement of love. Bailey loved botany, but he loved gardens and orchards more than books, and he loved books for gardeners more than books for professors. He knew that MAC had presented him with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study and teach what he wanted. Horticulture as a science remained wide open; when the University of Wisconsin offered him a high-paying position as a botany professor two years later, Bailey declined, despite the fact that he and Nettie were having their first child and probably could have benefitted from the salary increase. He could study botany as

a horticulturalist, but as a botanist, he felt he'd be too restricted.

I discover these facts about Bailey's young professional life as I flip through my personal copy of Dorf's biography, the same book in which I first discovered Bailey in the quiet college library at Valparaiso. His choices remind me of the local stories, most of them probably taken from Dorf as well, that I would hear at the museum about Bailey's young life in South Haven. One of Bailey's schoolteachers, an educated Englishwoman named Julia Field, agreed to teach subjects out of her comfort zone to interested students, and so Bailey took private classes at his country school in Latin and natural history. The latter course began after Bailey happened upon a book on natural history in a neighbor's cabin that had lost its cover and title page. The rest was intact, and it was enough for Mrs. Field to agree to let Bailey recite a couple pages to her each day as an independent study.

The interest in Latin came from a book that Bailey found in the small lending library that had been started in the back of a village store. Most of the books in the library he had probably seen, as they were donated by locals, but this one was new: *On the Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin. His father, after reviewing the book for several days, permitted his son to read it despite his conservative Christian beliefs, reportedly stating, "I can't understand much of this, but I think the man is honest and he means to tell the truth." Bailey struggled through it, fascinated if often overwhelmed, and at one point became stumped by the term *a priori*. His father could only tell him it was Latin, and so the new class with Mrs. Field began. He entered his education at the small two-room schoolhouse with a stutter and a penchant for collecting insects, frogs, and reptiles in his father's old toolshed, and he left it armed with all that a country-schooled child could hope to have gleaned, with Latin and natural history besides.¹¹ He'd later report that the lessons Mrs. Field gave him armed him with knowledge that he'd use the rest of

his life, although he had no idea it would be in the areas of horticulture and systematic biology. I wonder if Mrs. Field—a kind but proper woman as I imagine her who had been stuck, whether by choice or lack of options, teaching a rowdy bunch of Yankee farm kids on the edge of Anglo society—ever guessed that she would touch so deeply a child who would do great things, let alone become the founder of a field of study, a writer of philosophy, a poet and a prophet.

Young Lib continued to follow his loves, his obsessions. When his bookselling gig proved unappealing in '81, he got back to the university as fast as he could. He kept collecting things—both books and specimens—and he kept growing things. The way that he lists off species of plants in *The Garden Lover*, which he published the year he turned seventy as the last of a series of seven philosophical texts called *The Background Books*, calls to mind his exuberant listing of gardening-manual authors in *Garden-Making* thirty years before. In a chapter titled “307,” which refers to a special 20 x 40 foot garden of 307 different kinds of annual plants that he planted one year for the pure sake of “find[ing] out what they were,” he lets himself go. Usually very careful of his audience, in *The Garden Lover*, Bailey finally allows himself to write a text that is at once personal and devoted to his life’s primary obsession—the observation, study, and collection of plants. He does not apologize for referring to his plants in the reverential language of study. Interestingly, he flips between binomial and common names, heartily embracing the combination of botany and horticulture. Of his “specimen-garden,” he writes:

No, this form of gardening is not recommended to anyone. It is reserved specially for my own delight, and I have been addicted to it for so many years that I cannot forego it now as the day approaches the twilight. The plants in my garden and in all wild free places have been my companions. How many are the thousands and the thousands that have complimented me by growing in my garden, and what memories they release!

Choice associations these plants bring to me. Amongst the three hundred and seven were twenty-six kinds of lupines: species yellow, purple and violet,

blue, white, big-seeded and little-seeded, smooth and hairy, short and small and tall and big, native in Mexico and Guatemala, southern Europe, California, South America, Oregon, Texas, and otherwheres, all growing side by side where not one of them is naturally at home. Is it not wonderful?

Surely I should be thankful to collectors and seedsmen who have assembled these treasures and have made it possible for me to have them almost without effort in my little garden, all by myself. Here following each other in a row are two species of *Collinsia* (commemorating Zaccheus Collins, an early leader in Philadelphia) from California, the odd fleshy compositous *Cryptostemma* from South Africa and Australia, delicate *Diascia* from South Africa, *Dimorphothecas* waiting for the sun, an *Elsholtzia* from Asia (not to be confounded with the very different *Eschscholzias* of California), brilliant *Eutocas* from California may be named *Phacelia* if you prefer, several pleasing *Gilias* from the West, little western *Leptosiphons* that may be placed in *Gilia* or *Linanthes*, *Grahamia* ⁶⁷ninvite “in pastures and shrubby hills” of Chile now placed with the *Heleniums*, the pleasant *Helipterum corymbiflorum* of Australia, *Lasthenia* from California, indefinite *Leuceria senecioides* of Chile, button-headed *Lonas* (or *Athanasia*) of the Mediterranean country, brilliant *Tagetes* from Mexico, a dainty red-flowered little *Spergularia* not yet made out, and others. What a goodly internationalism is this! And what is the magic that enables all these diverse things from around the world to thrive in the one soil in my obscure garden? The world is surely a vast and pleasant democracy.¹²

In his wildly diverse garden, surrounded by silent companions who he knew by history, origin, and name, Bailey found a comfort and peace that his human neighbors could not match. If you trace his Background Books series, it is interesting to see him move from environmental manifesto in *The Holy Earth*, to the insight of poetry in *Wind and Weather*, to the political polemics *Universal Service* and *What is Democracy?*, written in response to the outbreak of the first World War, to the coming-of-age parable *The Seven Stars*, to the sociological study cum memoir of *The Harvest*, and finally to *The Garden Lover*, the quiet ruminations of an old horticulturalist in which he claims himself to have been, rather than expert, the perpetual amateur, reminding us of course that the true root of *amateur* is not novice or smatterer, but *lover*.

IV.

Funny how people return back and back upon themselves. I have routes I take through South Haven that lack directness, that I take for the grooves I've worn into my memory with them. My Christmas walk is like that. Home after the Namibian semester in college, when I still thought Heidi and I had a chance to do distance (although she had said it, she had made it quite clear that she had an Olaf back home), I felt myself for the first time suffocated by Christmas. I've always been a sucker for the magic of the holiday—everything from Jesus to Santa (but short of the mall)—I love the quiet domesticity and the warmth of candles and pine, the woven wool stockings and old straw ornaments, the nativity from Mexico and the Dala horses from Sweden. My parents do a dark green Christmas, and I love it. But that Christmas, still full from the heavy midday dinner and with a bit of free time before Dad would return from church and we'd do supper, I needed to get outside. It had only been a couple weeks since I had descended through clouds onto Detroit International Airport's landing strip and saw my first snow of the year as it fell—this after several months of aridity in southern Africa. I had put on a sweatshirt in the airport before leaving, and had a heavier jacket with me. When I saw the snow, I couldn't stop smiling.

Come Christmas, I hadn't fully readjusted, and needed to leave the house. I followed our Superior Street, one of the five Great-Lakes streets in town, west. Lakeward. There is some truth to the saying that all roads in west Michigan lead to the lake.

Have you not seen Lake Michigan? Do you envision an opposing shore? When tourists come into a downtown store and ask the cashier how to get to the lake, it might elicit a smirk. When a new clothing store opened in one of the downtown storefronts calling itself "Ocean

Wear,” it elicited loud derision from us every time we walked by. But when a child on the beach asks, “How big is the ocean?” I think we tend to let it be. Let these children call it ocean. This is our horizon, our end of the world. And in the cold months, when the shoreline stands deserted against the incessant freezing blasts of northwesterly winds, you could believe it too. Our little settlement reaches to the end of the bluff, mixes with the wooded sandy edge of the land, and then releases its imagination into the air, a meager offering over so much water.

In this way I took my stress, my twisted-up uncertainty that pointed back to a single slip of paper with antiquated typewriter symbols punched across it, signed Heidi, to the Lake and let it go. The trip became an annual practice for me on Christmas. I shiver a little to think about how simple it seems to take such stomachy weight up to a presence so much larger, and looking that presence in the eye, offer up the weight and feel it go. Something about it seems wrong, too simple, escapist. But I know it’s ancient too, that it’s how people have survived through centuries of splintered lives at the feet of mountains, the gates of jungles, the doors of temples, the mouths of rivers.

The night at the Baileys’ was to be the crowning jewel to a perfect day. Ben and I had gotten some fresh air and found the Bailey graves and had entered and toured the Star of the Lake Masonic Lodge for the first time, and I had secured some fifty volumes of the Proceedings of the Michigan Pomological and Horticultural Society. After my meeting with the HASH folks and moving the stacks of books into the backseat of my old Ford Taurus, I swung around to the house to pick Ben up and show him my museum catch. He was impressed, and he suggested that we swing by the Marathon station for some Mountain Dew, and then maybe order a pizza. Before we left the house, we also grabbed some board games that hadn’t been used in years out

of a closet in my room (which was now the guest room). “We have to make this an event,” Ben said.

“Why are we doing this again?” he asked after we had picked up the pizza and were headed to the museum.

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. “Because I’m writing about Bailey, and it might make a good story.”

“Okay, but what’s the point? I mean, why are you writing about him?”

I didn’t have an answer, so I told him he didn’t understand creative nonfiction. I wasn’t sure I did, either.

It was dark out when we arrived. I worked my key in the museum’s old lock, managed to get it open, and we unloaded everything into the kitchen. The kitchen’s been redone so many times that nothing’s original to the house anymore, so we take advantage of it for food preparation and storage. I grabbed a couple plates and donated Michigan State mugs that the museum uses for its events, and we tore into our pizza-and-Mountain-Dew dinner.

We had brought sleeping bags along. We weren’t sure whether it would be better to sleep in the bed in the upstairs of the museum, which was not original to the house but had been there a long time, or on the floor somewhere, but as we started playing Chinese checkers we tried to convince ourselves that we’d just pull an all-nighter. “Why not?” Ben asked. “There’s no real point in spending the night here just to sleep.”

“Well, sure there is,” I countered.

“What? Just sleep on the floor?”

“You know...” I smiled, tried to keep up the mock-serious joke we had going earlier.

“We could try to channel some Bailey juju. Have Bailey dreams. I don’t know.”

We played a couple games of Chinese checkers. Then we switched to regular checkers, and that was about it. We wore thin, and the Mountain Dew only made it seem stranger, more unreal. Finally we unpacked our sleeping bags and, after walking around the place, lay them out in the big room next to the kitchen that we at the museum had supposed was the dining room. We didn't even look upstairs where the bed was. We were a little jumpy partly just because we were walking around a museum after dark, sometimes with lights on and sometimes with flashlights, and we worried a little that someone might call the cops. That would be a little tricky to explain. And, of course, one type of jumpiness leads to another. I kept thinking of old Bailey Sr., the Mason with the long white beard, who had probably died in this house—who built this house.

The floor of the dining room is made of old wood planks, and it's hard. The planks have gaps between them here and there where they don't touch, and if you're lying on them at night in the middle of winter you'll notice that these gaps permit the sound of the subterranean heating system to reach you with extra clarity. That, and we had left the basement door open, as instructed by the museum board's Facilities Manager for the sake of air circulation, and the basement door opened right into the dining room. The basement of the Bailey Museum, which I had been in several times before, has *not* been changed much—under the stone foundations, which line the upper third of the walls, it's a dug-out pit, dirty and cavernous, that wends its way around a couple walls. You feel a little like you're standing in a crypt. I thought about that a few times as I lay there.

Occasionally, after maybe five or seven minutes of silence, the heating system would kick back in with a bang. It would whirl away for another ten minutes maybe, then turn back off, and another five or seven minutes later *BANG*, it kicked back in.

The night became less glorious. I could hear Ben turn over now and then. I did as well; we hadn't packed pillows. Several times I fell asleep briefly, and unfortunately I really did dream about Bailey—it was always Bailey Sr.'s face, stern as it always was in photos, looking at me in grayscale, a Masonic pendant hanging from his neck. The dream wasn't intimidating or particularly frightening—it just seemed to be reminding me that I couldn't get old man Bailey off my mind. And then, when the heating system kicked in, *that* would scare me.

Finally, after hearing Ben turn over for maybe the fifth or sixth time, I said, “We could probably call it a night.”

“Yeah. Thank you,” came the response. We sleepily repacked our bags and stuffed the pizza box into the dumpster. I told Ben I'd stop by to clean the dishes later in the week. We drove home.

Sometimes synchronicity feels like a haunting. Earlier that winter break, I walked into the TV room at my parents' house to join my dad in watching *A Christmas Carol*. It was his birthday, the 19th. Mom was out, Ben was still at school, and Sam was upstairs in his room. “I don't recognize this version,” Dad said, “but so far they seem to do a good job quoting the original Dickens.” I recognized it, but couldn't pin down where I had seen it, if not at home. I thought maybe in Mrs. Bartels's class, fourth or fifth grade.

“Is that the guy who played Magneto?” I asked, when Scrooge was onscreen.

“That's Patrick Stewart. Captain Jean-Luc Picard from the USS Enterprise.” I didn't know.

As the movie progressed, Dad muting the TV during commercials like Dad does, we decided it wasn't actually our favorite adaptation. But I also realized he actually had seen it

before. It had been another December 19th, over a decade earlier. The day Grandma Larson died in 1999. When the Ghost of Christmas Past led Scrooge into Fezziwig's party and I saw those high wooden walls, I got the shivers. But I didn't mention it.

Bailey's mom grew pinks. Sarah, the one who died young. Think carnations, but the ones she would have grown in the small flower garden would have been of a smaller, hardier variety. Humble plants, common to frontier gardens, inexpensive. After she died, Bailey's father taught him to tend the garden like she used to. This association stuck with him his whole life—he devotes a chapter to pinks in *The Garden Lover*, and one of the last books he published was *The Garden of Pinks*, which he begins with a reflection on his mother's influence. He was four—I imagine the garden of pinks provided his first introduction to the art of getting his hands dirty for the purpose of caring for vulnerable life. Every biographical piece I've read about Bailey's early life reports that he was always a daydreamy child, easily distracted and highly inquisitive. He must have spent hours in that little garden, observing the various worms and grubs with every hole he dug, maybe collecting certain specimens in a jar while his father tended to the orchards. I've heard that young children can't comprehend death, that that kind of abstract thinking comes later. Thus young Vardaman in *As I Lay Dying* tries to bore holes into his mother's coffin so she can breathe, makes sense of the situation by conflating his mother with a dead fish he had seen the day before. "My mother is a fish"—William Faulkner's most infamous chapter. But that always felt a little patronizing to me—really, Faulkner? I love your book, but—my mother is a fish? Did little Liberty lift his hands from the flower garden the day after his mother's death and think, dumbfounded, *My mother is a pink?*

My dad has always been the tender of our flower gardens. I remember helping plant

bulbs a couple times as a little kid, although it never became a regular task since Dad gravitates toward the minimal-maintenance, pretty annuals that will come back on their own after the first year—mainly daffodils and daylilies. So I must have been four, same as Bailey, when Dad and I planted the garden at the old parsonage as a gesture of our new occupancy—from my walks past since, it would seem that they’re still coming up each spring. I remember feeling disinterest and some resentfulness regarding the task, however. I think most of what I did involved pulling weeds, making sure to grip the dandelions close to the base and pull slowly to get the whole root system out, but I also remember Dad specifically showing me how to place the flower bulb into a small pit, right side up, and cover it with dirt. He didn’t need my help, but it was similar to the gestures he would later make, trying to get me to come outside and throw a baseball or shoot some hoops on days that he got off work early. But I wanted to know where the flowers were. If they were supposed to come out of those dirty gray bulbs, I felt pretty generally disinterested in whatever nasty flowers would spring up. It would become my first introduction to the birth and infancy of nonhuman life.

I wonder if Dad did the same thing with his father, a more avid gardener. Grandpa Linstrom grew up on the family farm in Nebraska, on the same land that his family had settled after moving from Swedesburg, Iowa in 1874, just seventeen years after emigration from Sweden. (For those keeping track, yes, that sets my family as arriving in the new land one year prior to the birth of young Liberty Hyde. Synchronicity, just saying.) Grandpa left the farm to go to college, ended up studying not agriculture but architecture, then went to seminary to become a pastor, and didn’t return. My whole life he’s lived in Elgin, Illinois, with my uncle Steve and, until her recent death, my grandma. Gardening has become a passion, his remaining connection to the land.

His gardens are intense. They're packed with different varieties of ornamental plants, as well as a good number of spices that he uses in the kitchen. I was visiting him with my family recently, and Grandpa asked me if I'd help him get some spices for the goose he was preparing in the kitchen. I didn't think at first that agreeing meant putting on a pair of shoes and tromping around the gardens with him out back, bringing in two long, sagging bunches of wonderfully sharp-smelling parsley, rosemary, and thyme, cold and wet with the recent rain. I bought him an old first-edition copy of *The Garden Lover* recently, and his main comment after reading it was, "Well, there were certainly some new ones in there for me." I notice little similarities these days between Grandpa's gardens, which encircle most of his pretty big backyard, and my dad's. One Thanksgiving at the grandparents', during a walk around the gardens, I heard Dad ask Grandpa about the different varieties of hostas he had growing. Grandpa showed them all to him, commenting on the flowers of each, the season that each bloomed, and which were his favorite. The next year, each of the three new trees in front of our house had a different variety of four hostas surrounding it.

Since leaving home, I have yet to live in one location year-round, so my gardening options have been limited to two pots in the kitchen—the first, basil, for pesto, and the second, purslane, for itself. Mom always used to keep pots of basil outside during the summer to make pesto—her signature dish, and the perpetual favorite comfort food growing up—so the two plants that share the pot I've perched on the kitchen window-sill provide as much memory-comfort as they do the occasional culinary comfort. They've begun to droop lately and grow a little pale, but they've lived from when I bought them in September right into February, and I've made a couple good batches of pesto from them. Every Sunday, when I water them, the smell that rises as the water disturbs the leaves provides reason enough to keep them around.

The purslane idea came to me the summer I worked at the Bailey Museum. Does the name sound unfamiliar? All Midwesterners probably recognize purslane, although few of us may know it by name anymore. Microsoft Word is apparently unfamiliar, thinking that I mean “pursuance,” “parlance,” “pursuant,” “praline,” or “purlin.” All incorrect, Word—although it also goes by the name “pusley” (pulley? pulse? parsley? paisley?). I can at least testify that if you live in either southwest Michigan or central Iowa, you’ve likely seen it all over town, growing through the cracks in the sidewalk. It’s an edible weed, and raw it tastes slightly lemony and salty. A friend in Iowa told me about purslane—she had been getting into local and seasonal (i.e., real and cheap) eating, and her friend passed on a recipe for warm purslane salad with garlic and raisins which she was quick to try and share with me. We didn’t gather our own purslane, since we didn’t want to ingest any of the stuff folks spray on their lawns in Ames (to keep the purslane, and other 76ninvited, out), but the local co-op actually had some in stock for cheap that week. The salad was great; very flavorful, warm, somewhat earthy.

So, with purslane in mind, I was sitting in the museum’s reading room one day, during the summer that I volunteered as the museum intern—a large, newer room, constructed with grant money a decade or two ago in the area roughly where the Baileys’ woodshed used to sit beside their house, where I spent time organizing the museum’s haphazard stacks and stacks of some three hundred books written by, edited by, and about Bailey into a system that would look a little more accessible and inviting to visitors interested in dipping into Bailey’s work—and I started thinking about Bailey’s thoughts on dandelions. A few slogans have evolved from Bailey’s writings and taken strong hold in the minds of the small Bailey-loving community in South Haven, and one of the most beloved is the statement, which he repeats in many of his books, that “Children love the dandelions; why may not we?” It’s the sentence at the top of the

museum director's blog and on the T-shirts made for the groundbreaking of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Interpretive Garden Path at North Shore Elementary School, and almost any Baileyphile in town can quote it to you, be they on the museum board, in the local Garden Club, or a regular attendee of the museum's summer lecture series. The earliest appearance I've found for it appears in the same introductory chapter to *Garden-Making*, the same chapter where he waxes on about the garden-book authors that went before him. Bailey begins that chapter with a passage that made me buy a copy of the book, if only for the reassurance and inspiration it gave me as an aspiring window-gardener. I haven't read past the first chapter—I haven't actually finished reading the first chapter—but I still don't regret paying the twelve bucks to have my 1902 copy shipped from Medford, Oregon. Bailey was forty, had moved to Ithaca with Nettie and their first daughter Sally (short for Sara May, named after Bailey's mother, the pink-grower) just four years before. He had just become Chair of Practical and Experimental Horticulture in Cornell's College of Agriculture the year before, and that year his second daughter Ethel, who would travel and work with her father into his old age, was born. He was fast becoming the leader in American horticultural studies as a science, an expert—but here's how he starts the little book on garden-making:

Every family can have a garden. If there is not a foot of land, there are porches and windows. Wherever there is sunlight, plants may be made to grow; and one plant in a tin-can may be a more helpful and inspiring garden to some mind than a whole acre of lawn and flowers may be to another. The satisfaction of a garden does not depend upon the area, nor, happily, upon the cost or rarity of the plants. It depends upon the temper of the person. One must first seek to love plants and nature, and then to cultivate that happy peace of mind which is satisfied with little. He will be happier if he has no rigid and arbitrary ideals, for gardens are coquettish, particularly with the novice. If plants grow and thrive, he should be happy; and if the plants which thrive chance not to be the ones which he planted, they are plants nevertheless, and nature is satisfied with them. We are apt to covet the things which we cannot have; but we are happier when we love the things that grow because they must. A patch of lusty pigweeds, growing and crowding in luxuriant abandon, may be a better and more worthy object of

affection than a bed of coleuses in which every spark of life and spirit and individuality has been sheared out and suppressed. The man who worries morning and night about the dandelions in the lawn will find great relief in loving the dandelions. Each blossom is worth more than a gold coin, as it shimmers in the exuberant sunlight of the growing spring, and attracts the bees to its bosom. Little children love the dandelions: why may not we? Love the things at hand; and love intensely. If I were to write a motto over the gate of a garden, I should choose the remark which Socrates made as he saw the luxuries in the market. "How much there is in the world that I do not want!"

I verily believe that this paragraph which I have just written is worth more than all the advice with which I intend to cram the succeeding pages. . . .¹³

Bailey, that's why I love you. I imagine that he wrote that introductory paragraph as much for his daughters as for the gardeners who would buy his book. And that reverence he seemed to bring to most of his writing about gardening, a young farm boy's reverence for the things that grow, that doesn't discriminate so much between the weed and the rose.

Given his philosophy of weeds and his advice about "lusty pigweeds," I figured I'd look up purslane in the relevant Bailey books. I started pulling them off the shelves in the reading library, and here's what I found.

It shows up in Bailey's *Hortus* (a magnum opus, the first-ever dictionary of horticulture), *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture* (another magnum opus, and just what it sounds like), *The Practical Gardener's Handbook*, *The Principles of Vegetable-Gardening* (of the Rural Science Series), and Ada Georgia's *Manual of Weeds* (edited by Bailey in the Rural Manuals series). In the *Cyclopedia*, which of course includes entries from many authors who Bailey gathered and edited, the purslane entry was written by Bailey himself. He clearly knew about the plant in a way that few horticulturalists probably cared to, but as he notes there and in *Vegetable-Gardening*, this plant was indeed under cultivation as a potherb. The fact that the humble herb may have been more popular among poorer rural farmers than among the scientific establishment did not make it less important to Bailey, and in the full two pages in *The Principles of Vegetable-*

Gardening dedicated to the plant he never refers to it as a “weed,” avoiding the term like a racial slur.

Now I see purslane everywhere. Who knew I’d ever feel affection for this common weed? *Portulaca oleracea*, as Bailey names it for me in the *Cyclopedia*; a relative of *Portulaca grandiflora*, the flowering “rose moss” of many brilliant colors that demands little in the way of growing conditions but that gives such a great show in sunny weather; an old friend who I’ve grown with my whole life, seen daily on the street, but never known by name. Near the end of the summer, I decided a potted *P. oleracea* might do well in my kitchen when I returned to Ames in the fall. Maybe someday I’ll decide that I’d like some rose moss in the side garden, possibly to provide ground cover around some daylilies and daffodils. I might buy a boxful of bulbs, place one of the dry, flaky things into a child’s hand and show her how to dig the little hole with a spade.

Maybe. But I’m transient now, a student looking forward to graduation and a short-term job or internship after that. To garden means to put down roots—not just your own, but forcibly those of others, be they pigweeds, parsley, or family. Maybe, for now, I will continue to plant seeds anyway. Until I can dig into my own garden, invest in the growth of a home, I have at least my two potted window plants, the basil and the purslane, the purslane that I picked in South Haven and brought along to Ames, potted with handfuls of soil from my mother’s school garden and from my father’s flower garden. It’s a form of havening, in its own way, little anchors to names I know. And I do have garden space at the shared house I rent here in Iowa, although I’m not around in the summer to tend it. If I am not in town to see the first blooms, my time would still not be wasted in a new birth here and there, the planting of foreign memories into a soil not my own.

It's a ridiculous story of small-town America that I would end up dating Amy for a week or so the summer before I moved to Iowa. I had graduated college in May and had been accepted into the MFA program at Iowa State earlier in the spring. I knew where I was going, but could not yet know what I'd find. I returned home that summer, to South Haven, to work for the city again as a beach parking attendant—the easiest but also the dullest of the city jobs, I had to take it when our boss at the marina refused for the second summer in a row to hire few enough people to give us full hours. Neil and Emily were both working the same side of the river as me that summer, so things were surreally high-school. Sometimes we thought it could have as easily been the other post-graduation summer, the one four years before when we were just preparing to leave South Haven for the first time to our separate colleges, but of course things had changed. Neil and I shared fewer inside jokes than we used to, and our cultural knowledge base had drifted a bit in different directions. Emily and I had grown a bit more brittle in our snappiness with each other and had a tendency to talk to Neil about each other behind our backs. Neil laughed about it and generally told me what Emily had told him.

Well, yes, it was like high school.

Amy started visiting us at the parking lot sometime in mid-July. She brought her son Cayden along, now a couple years old, and we'd play with him under the shade we set up each day in the middle of the lot, giving him pieces of colored sidewalk chalk that we used to mark the tires of paid cars. He was a sweet kid; we all liked him. It turned out that Emily didn't like Amy so much though, and she would talk about Amy when Amy wasn't around. I found this funny, and so did Amy when I'd tell her what Emily said later. In fact, Amy and I seemed to find each other quite funny, and interesting. Amy had been attending Ferris State University in

Grand Rapids, living in an apartment with her son and dealing with her ex-boyfriend, who got to take their son every couple weeks.

Yup, that's *ex*-boyfriend.

You can imagine what comes next, can't you? She began to visit us every time she was in town for the weekend—every time—and on the beach, of all places. In the summer, surrounded by seagulls, the lake audibly close when not in plain sight, the sunlight reflecting off the calm wavelets like a million chips of cloud! You can justly ask whether I loved her or loved the environment that seemed to follow her. But does it matter? Do we really change—as *people*, I mean, as *entities*—or do we just continue to alter our position in space, our place in relation to the lake and its dunes?

I confessed to Neil, haltingly and awkward, reprising the scene on our marching band trip in middle school some eight or ten years before. He seemed relatively unmoved, and even laughed when I got to my main point of concern.

"Neil," I protested, "she has a *baby*."

"Well, you're not trying to marry her, are you? Who cares?" When I didn't respond, he laughed again and elbowed me, leaned in near my ear. "*Kiss her*."

I remember sitting, less than a week after that conversation, in a park at midnight in Grand Rapids, talking with Amy. She had introduced me that day to her favorite local microbrewery, Founders, and to a couple friends, then to her favorite midnight hot dog place, then to her place, and then we went on one of her favorite midnight walks to the local park. She had invited me to visit that weekend because her ex had Cayden. I remember sitting close to her and not touching, long pauses in conversation and not kissing. We laughed and bantered and let long silences sit. I was terrified. This was Amy Patnaude, *the* Amy Patnaude who had haunted

the background of my dreams for most of my life. And she had a baby. And—it was August.

I left the next morning for South Haven after a quick breakfast with Amy, having slept through the night on her couch. She looked exhausted, she wondered how Cayden was doing, and I felt terrible.

Now I was wracked. I thought about her constantly, and finally even went to my dad for advice. He listened respectfully in the car on the way to the grocery store. When I finished, and we were pulling in to the grocery store parking lot, he pointed out that I had only been hanging out with Amy for a few weeks that summer, and that I would be heading to Iowa soon. I affirmed his comment, although it seemed meaningless.

Then, as we pulled into a parking spot, he said, “But you know, the fact that she has a child doesn’t really give you the right to treat her differently than anyone else. Keep in mind that she may have a more vested interest in a more serious relationship than you might have, but treat her like a real person. Don’t commit to something you can’t commit to. But who knows—” and then he concluded with the perpetual advice he’s always given me with relationships, that I’ve never been good at following, “just go at it with a light touch, will ya?”

Breakthrough. The superego was lifted.

The next weekend, Amy visited South Haven and dropped Cayden off at her grandparents’ place. We wanted to see the sunset over the lake. We walked along the beach, to the end of the old concrete pier where the old red lighthouse, South Haven’s most-recognized landmark, stood in its seemingly ancient iron shell, turning its symbol over the old Mouth o’ River. My chest goes light as I remember it, how nervous and shivery I felt. It wasn’t until after the sun had set, as we walked back down the pier together, that I finally let out with it.

“I’m sorry if this makes you upset,” I began—strategically hoping that it would either a)

cushion her rejection or b) endear her to me more—“but it’s funny. It seems like almost ever since I met you—I mean, sailing, piano lessons—I’ve always sort of been really attracted to you. And, I guess I still am.”

I was trying to explain the mysterious haunting of my life to the one person who could lift the curse. It was something darker and more powerful than I could capture in nerve-wracked starts and fits. And who could have anticipated—of all the possible responses, of all the ways to reject me, to express disappointed surprise, or even to confirm what I hoped, what I had hoped for years—who would predict her response? *Yes*, she said, and *it’s funny, I’ve also always felt that way about you too. And do.*

Synchronicity, anybody? Trumpets, blow thy clarion call, and singers, hie thee the hell over here—and holy shit!

As we walked across the white sand, fading in the pink twilight, I just went for it and took her hand, fingers braided, and it was soft. And back in her car, we did what every high schooler is supposed to do, what I had never done through all of high school and college—we kissed, the sunlight from over the edge of the world slowly going purple, the slow waves hissing over the sand as they always had, as they would when we separated less than an hour later to our parents’ respective houses again, as I packed my bags for Iowa and she packed her backpack for Grand Rapids. And as we kissed, I was oddly reminded of the scene in *Peer Gynt* when the hero, Peer, now an old man, returns to Norway after his life’s long travels overseas, only to find himself lost in the woods of his home country, drawn to the beautiful singing of a woman, and follows the song only to find the cabin where the love of his young life, Solveig, sits, lost in song and in the dreams of the aged, waiting for her love to return home again; singing, waiting in the dark cool woods with the constancy of a sea lapping tunefully over the same sands, turning and

returning on its strange old home again.

To be fair, stranger things have worked out. I knew Amy needed someone more constant, someone nearby to make her life as a student mother easier, and I would have made it harder. Still, I hoped that she would return my calls. I remember sitting on the porch of the rented house where I lived with two other grad students, watching the sunlight slice through gaps in the leaves of the elm tree out front, my cell phone on the armrest next to me, not ringing.

It would have been the perfect hometown romance. Is that what people mean, when they speak of their spouse as their “high school sweetheart?” I guess Amy is the closest thing to a high school sweetheart I ever had, and that chapter has closed. The most shocking thing about our week-long summer fling came out during that conversation with Amy on the end of the pier. “What do you want to do when you grow up?” she asked, laughing. The phrase sounded funny, but we meant it, I think—neither of us felt particularly grown up. I didn’t, but I think even Amy, with her kid, knew she wasn’t grown up either. We sat between worlds, wondering. I had no definite plans, but when I turned the question back to Amy she talked about the print shop, Pat’s Pronto Printing, that her family has run in South Haven for several generations now. She said ultimately that she would like to be involved with that business and keep it in the family, that her sister wasn’t too interested and it was really up to her. I told her that sounded great, and I thought to myself that it sounded great too—how cool would that be, to be involved with a small printer and to be a writer on the side, maybe printing my own chapbooks to sell in local gift shops on consignment! I felt my life coming full circle, like I was getting ready to start on my real business in the world. Maybe the prep work was finally almost over and I could settle here, dig in. And I had only recently begun to meet the Bailey people then, connecting with the

museum director to see if he'd support my mom and I in an effort to start a Liberty Hyde Bailey Interpretive Garden Path over at her elementary school. If only Amy and I could make it through my years in grad school—or maybe she'd be done at Ferris State in the next year or so and could move with Cayden out to Iowa for a year, and then we'd go back home, back—

We graduated from high school, the class of '06, like bats out of hell. Some of us had been accepted into college, some to jobs out of town, and some hadn't quite figured out how to make the break yet. But many of us would, at least for a while. Jordan started work at the factory pretty early on—his then-girlfriend Holly had their first kid a year or two after he graduated—and Troy had planned to get into a competitive car-restoration vocational program on scholarship while he finished his high school work. But plans change; Troy stayed in town and joined Jordan at the plant, and now he's engaged. Neil continues his college studies, having finally chosen a major, and hopes to leave Michigan for better prospects in teaching high school science or elementary school. Emily got her music education degree and has begun her first teaching gig in rural Wisconsin. Another best friend from high school, Jared, put his studies in theater and sign language at Kalamazoo Valley Community College to a halt, along with his aspiration to work as a technician in an urban deaf theater, and moved to Arizona to live with a couple other Michigan friends, wait tables at a Carrabba's, with the hope to eventually pursue a culinary arts degree. I have only vague aspirations to teach in some capacity and to write things, and have fled the job market again to the MFA program at Iowa State. I still try to make it home when I can (Pink Floyd's reprise track of "Breathe" comes to mind), and even as our diaspora deepens, I continue to find friends my age when I return home in the winters and summers. Of course, it's not clear if *home* is the right term there, and if not, what would have to happen to make it home,

to become *local*.

I looked local up in the *OED*, hoping to find an etymological loophole in meaning, some way to apply the term without question to myself. Turns out it hasn't changed much. Trace it to the French *local*, the Latin *locālis* and *locus*, and it pretty much always refers to "place." I could find no poetic or philosophical way around the inherent geographical quality of the term. It seems that localness has always been a pretty straightforward, concrete, unforgiving quality—and, having been from elsewhere and having gone elsewhere, I stand unforgiven, by that word at least.

Christmas and predictably antsy. I'm wearing my day-old Norwegian sweater, the one thing I requested for Christmas this year. This Norwegian sweater, hand-crafted in the town of Dale in Norway, represents another attempt to reconnect to my claimed past and ancestry, although unlike my mother's and grandparents' Norwegian sweaters (also manufactured by Dale of Norway—Mom said you can't trust any other company) it comes with a brand tag on the arm and the benefit of a drawstring hem. They're always one hundred percent hand-woven wool, making them very warm (and, as Grandma will often point out, never *too* warm, although that's highly contested), so this walk is meant to test its abilities.

I admit, I shiver.

As I look over the lake from the top of the bluff, it strikes me that this is the first time I've seen it since returning home from Iowa for the holidays. The blueness of it can catch you off guard—partly the effect of massive die-offs in organismal populations that would have kept it greener-looking if the zebra mussels hadn't eaten them all. I'm precisely midway through the three-year grad program now, and no closer to knowing what's next. It's particularly windy

today, and every once in a while a wave will crash into the pier, down below and farther out, and spray over the top of the lighthouse. With this sweater as my only defense against the cold of my annual Christmas walk this year, I don't want to stick around too long. I walk past St. Basil's Catholic Church and onto the same lawn that I've watched Fourth of July fireworks from so many years before. I reach out, past the hedges at the edge of the lawn, and brush my fingers along the tops of the dune grass that marks the steep descent to the beach below. I'm at the edge of my old settlement, the place where at some point a group of Catholics decided to grab a stretch of bluffside estate before the rest of the neighborhood would go into wealthy residential development. I'm very close to the place where old Judge J. S. Monroe built the first log cabin in South Haven some hundred and eighty years ago, not far from the site of the first lumber mill that would make the settlement a village, and a hop skip and jump from the marina where I worked with Amy and where stages are have been set annually since the early nineties for the town's annual Harborfest in June and Blueberry Festival in August. But here, fingers twined through sharp dune grass, that's all behind me. I look to a horizon that meaninglessly divides blue from blue and decide to go for it, call myself rooted, stand there a minute more. Because I love this town, the grass and the sandy grit of it, the underfunded schools and the old ladies at the Bailey Museum. I look to the horizon, and I wonder if that's just what South Havenites have done for generations now, somewhere between satisfied and dissatisfied, glad for the vista but wondering about horizons, home in a place of peripheral yearning, antsy and on the edge.

Dear Bailey,

I don't understand why you chose to be interred in a mausoleum.

I visited you with Bob Dirig. After I emailed him about the apartment complex where I would be crashing on a friend's friend's couch while in Ithaca, he told me to meet him at the mall in front of the Old Navy. As my friend's friend drove me around the parking lot a couple times, we finally decided we had found him—the older gentleman with the wisping white hair leaning on a decorative boulder going through the stack of papers on his clipboard. After spending a half hour by the boulder, going through the informational papers he had gathered for me, he brought me to his car and said, “Incidentally, have you ever seen an herbarium press?”

I hadn't, and he lifted out of his truck a wooden press essentially identical to what you would have used, with his recently collected specimen slowly drying and flattening inside. That started two days of travelling around Ithaca with Bob, a former curator of the herbarium that you started at Cornell who was lucky enough to work with your daughter Ethel, as he showed me “all the Bailey sites.” But it was the mausoleum at the top of the hill in the cemetery, even though it was a Sunday and a chain had been wrapped around the mausoleum gate, a padlock through it, and all we could do was lean against the bars, stand on our toes at the windows on either end—it was the mausoleum that stuck with me the most.

I notice that you rarely write about death. “We talk of death and of lifelessness,” you wrote in *The Holy Earth*, “but we know only of life. Even our prophecies of death are prophecies of more life. We know no better world: whatever else there may be is of things hoped for, not of things seen.” You're putting forward your idea of a philosophy based on life, but you're also taking on the idea of heaven there. And in the next paragraph: “The earth is the

scene of our life, and probably the very source of it. The heaven, so far as human beings know, is the source only of death; in fact, we have peopled it with the dead. We have built our philosophy on the dead.”¹⁴

Yes—right on. I’ll get to my problem in a second, but first, I love that section of your book. I got the idea in my head sometime in high school or college, I think, that a big problem with a lot of pop-Christianity was this obsession with “heaven” as a place not of this earth, as some high-in-the-sky cloudy spot where we’d get to hang out with all the people who went before us and those who will come later, maybe take a stroll down some beach with some of them like tourists on a vacation. Maybe some of those people don’t realize that beach towns are less rosy when you live in them for eternity. But more importantly, heaven, when it forms the background of everything that a privileged suburban Christian youth believes in, when it becomes the reason that he or she wants to do good in the world (to get there and to get others there), it’s easy to lose sight of reality. Including the reality that even the Bible doesn’t say much at all about an actual alternate-reality cloud palace, and that most references to the “Kingdom of God” are references to a future utopian earth. (That’s why Jesus gives us all those examples of how to live rightly, to “bring about the Kingdom of God,” right?) So anyway, when I read your statements about how we’ve “built our philosophy on the dead” by developing it from a heaven that, in the natural universe, seems to us to be the source of little more than death if we venture into it (spacesuits aside), I guess I got excited. It’s early on in the book, page 7, and it helped keep me going through the rest of the thing. When people try to soundbite your philosophy, they tend to latch onto statements like “Verily, then, the earth is divine, because man did not make it,”¹⁵ or “Man has dominion, but he has no commission to devastate,”¹⁶ or “The living creation is not exclusively man-centred; it is bio-centric”¹⁷—but I think your bit on grounding our

philosophy in the earth rather than in the heavens is more essential to the whole worldview you were trying to articulate.

I wish everyone thought enough about their lives to have books' worth of philosophy that needed explaining!

But here's the thing, Bailey—I'm a little skeptical. Your earth-over-heaven idea seems consistent with your life in some ways. One of the best-loved stories at the Museum back home is the way that, after you watched your mother die from diphtheria at the age of four, your father taught you to care for your mother's little garden of pinks in front of the house. I imagine your grubby little fingernails digging up worms to play with while you planted, the way your attention wandered to the flock of passenger pigeons overhead while you watered. (Was it like that? Or was it less romantic?) And from that year forward, every year of your life (and I hope even the final few, after your fall, when you were no longer able to travel) you kept a garden. Whether you were in Ithaca or Shanghai in a given year, you always found a plot of earth to cultivate, to remind yourself (almost obsessively, it seems) that what came from the earth was life, somehow different every time, and diverse.

But you would not be buried in the earth, Bailey! Both Annette and yourself, and probably Ethel too, chose the dark community mausoleum at that cemetery on the hill in Ithaca. It's nothing fancy, but it does have that strange sense of permanence that seems unlike you, the solid block of bodies raised above the soil, probably with reinforced steel to resist earthquakes and the like. All around the grounds were lovely—flowers, shade trees, and the snaking path along the steep slope of the cemetery on the hill. Birds, and in the evenings I imagine there are fireflies and stars. But nestled way back into the trees at the top of the slope, that almost menacing building, the hewn stone. I understand that some people choose mausoleums out of an

aversion to the thought of being buried in the earth, but that absolutely couldn't have been your reason—I don't believe it.

Was it pride? Did you feel that the solidity and permanence of the mausoleum would be important to somehow physically preserve your legacy? I have heard, I admit, dear Bailey, that that was the path you leaned toward a bit in old age. That you became a more distant, aloof, a bit more proud. Maybe pride, mixed with enough frugality that you wouldn't have had a separate tomb built Whitman-style, led you to that dark place.

Remember John's dream, looking down at you like you were Lenin? Is that how you really want to be remembered?

Your body might be stuck in that gray building for centuries, without a blade of grass in sight for any visitor who comes to see you. That is where you are, Bailey. That is where you will be. You decided that. You left me with that, that body behind a stone, stacked over and under other bodies, and then you left me with a bunch of words instructing me to build my philosophy out of the earth and not "on the dead." Who do I listen to, you or your book?

You should have been placed in a box in the ground where no one would find you, like Ed Abbey. You should have had a garden planted over your grave. You should have been ashes scattered over the sea. Bob and I couldn't even get to you, Bailey. The house was locked.

CHAPTER FOUR, SYMPHONIES AND SWEET POTATOES

- L. **Batàtas**, Poir. *Sweet potato*. Creeping: leaves heart-shaped to triangular, usually lobed: flowers (seldom seen) 3 or 4, light purple, funnel-form, 1½ in. long. Tropics; grown for its large edible root-tubers.

L. H. Bailey, from *Botany: An Elementary Text for Schools*, Second Edition (1907), 1911, p. 380

I used to kiss my grandmother goodnight. I'm not sure who started, my brother Ben or I, but one of us and then the other started going to bed regularly without kissing our parents because we thought we had outgrown it, and then, the next time we visited Elgin in Illinois to stay with our grandparents, we hugged Grandma and Grandpa goodnight without a kiss. I remember noticing, at least with Grandma, visible disappointment, along with an explanation from my dad. And then my brothers and I walked off to the bunked beds upstairs.

The experience had always been strange, anyway. I'd purse up my lips into a tiny soft beak, press them into the adult's larger beak, and make a smacking sound during the release. It was formal, not terribly sensual, intimacy. With Grandma, the kiss came with an over-the-top smile that she seemed to reserve for grandkids, and that we appreciated for its gratuitousness. Mom had never kissed them goodnight—she had rarely hugged her own parents growing up, let alone kissed them, so it wouldn't have made sense with Dad's parents. Dad did continue to kiss his parents goodnight, despite the boycott Ben and I had begun, but he didn't make Grandma smile the same way that we had. And of course, it wasn't long before Sam would discontinue the kisses as well, and then Dad was the only one.

545. What is a potato? One is shown in Fig. 380. It has "eyes," or buds, and over each bud is a minute scale which answers to a leaf. The potato tuber does not give rise to

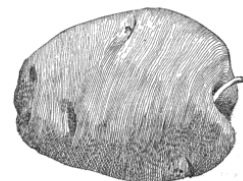


FIG. 380.
Potato.

roots. It is a stem.

L. H. Bailey, from *Lessons with Plants: Suggestions for Seeing and Interpreting some of the Common Forms of Vegetation*, Third Edition, 1902, p. 362

I remember the Linstrom Thanksgivings of my childhood like this. It happened every year. From separate satellite points scattered over the Midwest, we'd wake early, eat breakfasts calculated to fill without stuffing, and pull on buttoned shirts, black shoes. Nine o'clock church, with no lunch afterward. Our fathers would nervously hurry us to our minivans as we packed the old black bags, our mothers would put in a CD or change the radio. We would nap when we could. We would turn on our GameBoys, stick in our earbuds, try to draw shapes into the window's condensation without our parents noticing. We'd leave marks. We'd smell the stale car-trip smell of the old Dodge Caravan, and remind each other, "Look out the front window. Don't throw up."

In our cars, we knew the landmarks. From the Caravan, Michigan's stands of trees would gradually thin. We'd pass the pair of blue metal towers (what was in them, we've never known) with the Christmas lights on top, the rust-belt fire-belching steel mills of Gary, the acrid smell when we opened the doors to use the McDonald's restroom at the entrance to the Illinois Tollway. When we'd drive over the rock quarry we'd know we were getting close, and we'd compete to see who could spot the Sears Tower first. Then the buildings would thin too, everything spreading out, and eventually the one-car basket-tollbooth that would spit us out into Elgin, "The City in the Suburbs."

Elgin meant Thanksgiving. It meant food—so much food consumed that relatives sometimes resented when Mom wanted to go for a run in the afternoon. But it also meant the musty smell of the old basement, the carpeted basement room where we played with generations

of old Matchbox and Hot Wheels cars, some metal, some with opening doors. Elgin meant we'd probably go out for a movie later with our cousins, that we might stop at the Toys“R”Us on the way home.

Elgin meant our grandparents, and our grandparents meant all of these things. They also meant gatherings, the only times we saw our entire paternal family assembled. They meant power and continuity. They would speak to us of symphonies, the Nebraska farm, the Ogallala aquifer, and our parents' childhoods. They told us they loved us, even though we only saw them a couple times a year. And somehow, they meant the words they said, the kisses they gave before bed. How could any child know where all the meaning comes from? The house in Elgin swirled with signifiers bent in circles, spinning in the carpeted den, shooting from eyes that tended to look a lot like our own.

“[The sweet potato] has interesting relationships, for it is a very close kin of the morning-glory and moonflower. The common morning-glory is *Ipomœa* (Ipome'a) *purpurea*; the sweet potato is *I. Batatas*. (Batatas is one of the original forms of the word potato.) The sweet potato plant is a vine bearing purplish flowers like small morning-glories. These flowers are not often produced in this country. The sweet potato is probably native to tropical America, but its origin has not been traced. Some authorities think that it does not occur truly wild, but has developed in the course of centuries from another species.”

L. H. Bailey, from *The School-Book of Farming: A Text for the Elementary Schools, Homes and Clubs*, 1920, p. 195

My grandmother died last year, and the only electronic trace she left me was an email with a recipe. I never delete emails—I always archive them, keep them searchable—and of the twenty-four brief email conversations between my paternal grandparents' shared email address and my own, only one seems clearly written and signed by Grandma Linstrom.

November 17, 2008. I was a junior in college and studying abroad in Windhoek,

Namibia. By November, homesickness had seeped into most of the twenty-two of us American students, so in a strange act of collective nostalgia we decided to throw the biggest Thanksgiving dinner of our lives in the packed house we had been sharing for months, a great potluck with each person taking responsibility for a different food from our own family's tradition. The starchy smells of baked mac & cheese and turkey stuffing would blend with the oily aroma of fried chicken and a tart-but-sweet undertone from the cranberries, we told ourselves as we planned it the day after Halloween—we were all excited—in our minds we could each already smell a certain room of a certain house, thousands of miles and a month away. A day and time had been set to meet in the living room to parse out food responsibilities, and I remember being there early, sitting cross-legged on the stiff carpet. I fidgeted, smashed the ends of my fingers into the carpet while a few people discussed logistics, going over the same points with different nuances the way that other people only do when you're the most anxious to say something else. As soon as the floor was open, I blurted.

“Sweet potatoes. I gotta do the sweet potatoes.”

Great-Grandma Larson's sweet potatoes. Ida Larson's death represented the first real funeral experience of my life, when I was about nine years old. My memories of her house consist of three locations—the living room/toy closet, the seemingly exotic lattice-work archway in the small backyard, covered in roses, and the dining room/kitchen complex. Grandma Larson died at the age of one hundred, but she lived by herself in this house until her last couple years. Even at the age of ninety-eight, the kitchen seemed to be her most comfortable, natural living space. The smells I can't recall distinctly, but they were domestic in the most comforting way, and they emanated as if directly from the small, mysterious, wise old Swede as she cranked the meat grinder or lifted a sausage from a simmering pot for inspection. These days my father

continues to evoke the memory of Grandma Larson every Christmas—whenever possible, our Swedish cooking recipes and techniques derive from either her kitchen or from one that lies beyond the reach of existing memory. Swedish meatballs, potato sausage, the *doppa i gryten* feast. If anyone could go farther back, it would be Ida's elder daughter, my great-aunt Lois, who now lives in a nursing home and grows frailer each year. It was Lois who always brought the sweet potatoes to Thanksgiving throughout my early memory.

Our Thanksgiving sweet potatoes are not the first food that my family would want me sharing. They're not exactly gourmet. They are treated differently than the rest of the dishes on the Thanksgiving table, most of which carry some representation on every adult's plate, if not on every child's. The turkey, which comes out of the kitchen in a pile of frayed, steaming strips, must be sampled by all—Grandma and Grandpa Linstrom have taken turns tending it all day, and it is understood to deserve respect. If it is tender to the point of falling apart, we praise the chefs at the far ends of the elongated table (Grandma at the end of the kitchen end of the dining room and Grandpa at the other end of the table, halfway into the living room), and if it is a little tougher on a given year, we eat up. We stifle children who complain, pretend it didn't happen. There is the stuffing, that curious and softly chewy, simple amalgam of ripped up bread, celery, onion, and the turkey's juice which alone grants it flavor. The cranberries are real, not the canned-jelly kind, and come from berry farms near my family's home in southwestern Michigan, prepared and brought by my mom along with her small loaves of fresh bread. The cranberries' tartness means they are eaten up by most adults and generally not touched by the younger kids, as a rule, but Mom's made-from-scratch fresh roles with butter are always a hit. So the dishes travel around the table, hand to hand among as many as twenty of us, and we eat more than we need and then some. And at the end of the meal, out comes Grandma's much-anticipated

pumpkin pie. Everyone then looks down to the end of the table where she sits, waiting for her to take the first bite. “Oh, come on,” she’d say, turning her chin down and looking at us imploringly, and then, with mock-meekness, she’d take the tiniest bite from the tip of her slice—and the meal’s final course would commence.

The sweet potatoes, though, are a point of pervasive contention. Among adults and kids alike, they have their detractors as well as their enthusiastic supporters—well, at least I would count myself and several of the younger kids in the latter category. When Aunt Lois brought them, she followed her mother’s “candied” recipe, and candied apparently means marshmallows. There were two layers to this dish—the actual candied sweet potatoes, which formed a sugary-sweet orangey semi-mush throughout most of the pan, and the layer of marshmallows, expanded and lightly browned over the top. Because the marshmallows were slightly melted, they formed a layer of chewy resistance that worked well with the softness of the sweet potatoes below—so I have always thought. My imagination could get lost in the warm, deep dish, swimming laps in the sugary syrup. The dessert-like quality of the whole thing made some adults turn away, and the mushiness was a little too gross for some of the kids among us, but sweet potatoes were always my absolute favorite Thanksgiving dish, and I staunchly supported them through the years, taking much more than my fair portion (which generally turned out to be an okay practice).

Eventually, however, something had to give. Over the past few years, my godparents, excellent caterers from Wisconsin, have brought an alternative sweet potato dish, which involves a caramelized nut topping and probably less sugar and butter. It’s actually great—probably an improvement, all things considered—but it lacks the utterly sweet abandon of the old dish, the silly Scandinavian indulgence of the simple staples, sugar and butter.

I had never made them, but I figured they couldn't be too hard, so I thought I'd introduce Grandma Larson's sweet potatoes to Namibia. I emailed my grandparents later that week, and now my grandma's response has become a sort of treasured, ethereal, electronic relic. She wrote it; the amazing thing in the age of the Internet is that she clearly did not look it up on a website and copy/paste it—I'm not sure she would have known how to—and each fumbled letter refers back to her own fingers, at a time when they were warm. The details she may have looked up on a 3x5 note card somewhere, but I like to think she remembered them offhand.

Hi John,

It has been so good to hear from you. We think of you often and are waiting to hear about your months in Africa. We were just watching the Today Show on TV and Ann Curry is with a group climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.

I'm feeling pretty good except for the coughing. I'm still taking tests but hope to get going on the chemo soon. I still can't believe this is really happening to me as I feel good but now just hope they can get on top of it. We have a top of the line lung specialist from Rush in Chicago so that should help. We're looking forward to Thanksgiving but wish you could be here too. I guess the best we can do is to send you the Sweet Potato Recipe - good luck. Love you' dear grandson. Grandma

Candied Sweet Potatoes

6 medium Sweet Potatoes

1/3 cup melted butter

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 cup brown sugar

1/4 cup Water

Wash and cook sweet potatoes until tender. Peel and cut in halves length ways and arrange in shallow pan or baking dish. Cover with the melted butter and a syrup made by cooking the brown sugar and water together for five minutes. Sprinkle with salt and bake in a slow oven 350 f. for 1 hour basting frequently. The potatoes should be transparent when done. cover the top of the potatoes with marshmallows and return to the oven until soft and slightly browned (short time).

456. What is a sweet potato? One is shown in Fig. 381. It has no "eyes" or scales. It produces roots. It is a thickened root.

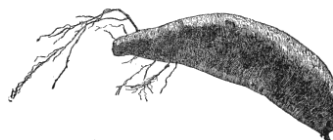


FIG. 381.
Sweet potato.

L. H. Bailey, from *Lessons with Plants*, p. 363

When a person dies, her body parts into so many organs, strung together by a little thread here and there and gathered tightly in a package—bundles of tendons, mysterious sinews. There's not much there, certainly not quite what you recall, and you must again readjust yourself to what a body is, maybe give up guessing.

I would not understate her legitimate power after death. There does seem to be an aura that hangs around her still as you look down to the closed eyelids, the relaxed forehead. You recall her last words. You can imagine how she'd react if she woke. Maybe you reach out and touch her cold brow, or kiss her one last time, and you feel that odd solidity that the dead carry, and you think, maybe there is something, maybe there is essence here still. But you must step politely aside, let the next mourner approach.

We're never left with much. But we look for it. We finger gently through domestic relics, hoping to catch some essence, poking around in little boxes, plastic photo sleeves, glowing screens. And we do; we find a little more wholeness than we started with. We bind up what's left of bodies long buried and start asking questions again. And later, we'll need a little food, a little sleep.

Grandma's hair—short, curly, and yellow—looks so perfect in my memory. She would spend some time every morning sitting in her burgundy leather lazy-boy with curlers in, which always seemed like a strange ritual to me, growing up. I've heard it said that she had to dye it to keep it yellow, that it had actually been white for some years. During the last year or so of her life, it became less common to see her with her hair done. At the funeral, the undertaker had done an impeccable job, we all agreed, getting Grandma's hair the way she'd want it.

When I saw her in the casket, I did reach out and press her folded fingers with my own. Then, a little worried that no one else would (though they did), I leaned over and kissed her forehead. It was cold.

Propagation is mostly by means of “draws” or “slips,” which are sprouts removed from the tubers. For this purpose the tubers are placed in a bed (as a hotbed) and covered with loose earth. The slips are removed as they grow and form roots. Two to four crops of slips may be taken from the tuber. The tips of the young vines also make good cuttings, and the late or main crop may be grown from them.

L. H. Bailey, from *The School-Book of Farming*, p. 198

I like to remember my grandma’s sharpness of attention, the way she could zero in and focus all of her perception onto a single grandchild, erasing whatever uncertainties hovered around a room of extended family. Conversation she treated with all the concerted dignity of high drama. Sitting in my grandparents’ den with uncles, aunts, and cousins—on the couch, the extra chairs, the floor—someone might make a joke she found distasteful, about Beethoven, say, or Bach. She would work her face into a massive, over-exaggerated scowl and shake her head toward the ceiling, saying with breathless emphasis, “I don’t know how, but *this* is the family I raised....” An uncle might then try to throw a joking comeback, but Grandma wouldn’t acknowledge it. She’d flip her expression upside-down into a beaming grin, hunch her shoulders as if trying to make a secretive aside, and whisper, “At least my grandkids came out okay,” making eye contact with each of us in turn. It was always as if no one else had said anything worth hearing. She had an impressive ability to make certain people feel important, but more than that, I think she knew that we felt excluded from the adult-dominated conversation, and she was the one who always made an effort to bring us in, even in to a special inner circle with her that none of our parents were quite allowed into.

She was a powerful woman, a strong-built Swede who spoke her mind, but I think the very locus of her power may have been located in her famous “Linstrom Nose.”* Aside from occasionally scrunching it up into an expression of mock-disgust, her nose served generally as the solid resting-place around which her elastic facial features danced. And it held considerable prominence; a solid inch-and-a-half’s worth. She would pass the Linstrom Nose on to all four of her sons, and with it uncanny powers of olfactory perception. Without fail, when the Linstrom Nose comes into conversation my father will recall the day he and his brother Tim snuck a bag of forbidden potato chips from the snack closet when they were kids. They were sitting in the den when they heard their mother unlocking the door, so my dad flung the bag under the couch well before the door creaked open. It reportedly did not take Grandma more than one step into the house before she called out, “Who’s been eating potato chips?” She smelled them instantly, two rooms away. Hers had always been the archetype of the Linstrom Nose, the first that we knew of and the greatest. A “regal” nose, as my father sometimes describes it (to my mother’s amusement), it seems to have skipped my generation altogether.

I flipped through a few photos of myself the other day, looking for traces of Grandma in my face. If you look carefully, I think you can see a similar sharpness to the contours of my eyebrows—mine are lighter, though, and fade into my forehead more. The mouth seems to bear some similarity, but particularly I think it’s something to do with the alacrity of my cheeks and forehead, the quick transitions between expressions, that I’ve inherited. It’s something about the movement of muscle between the pictures, the ability to express thoughts and emotions in rapid succession. It’s not solid, not definable—it’s intangible, nebulous, somehow marginal. But that Linstrom Nose, that rudder of purposeful directness with which she could command and navigate the emotions of a room—that I certainly lack.

* Technically, of course, a Larson nose.

A forcible illustration of the fact that bulbs, corms, tubers, and the like are storehouses of plant-food is suggested by Fig. 384. This represents an old potato tuber (*a*), from which new tubers have grown, while it was still in the bin. This is a frequent occurrence in potato bins in which there are tubers a year or so old. The tuber endeavors to grow, but finding neither light nor soil, it makes new tubers out of its own substance.

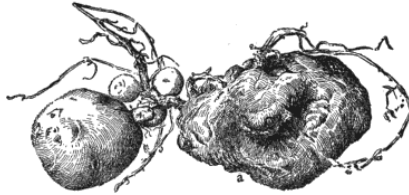


FIG. 384.
Old potato tuber giving rise to new tubers.

L. H. Bailey, from *Lessons with Plants*, pp. 365-6

I heard about the cancer over the phone while in Namibia. My only phone connection to the States was the landline in the kitchen, so I heard about it while surrounded by people walking around, chatting, eating. That memory is completely blank; I don't remember what was said or by whom. Thyroid. "Advanced."

(We didn't know until later that it was actually metastasized stage 4 lung cancer that had spread to the thyroid. I remember the absolute despair of that news. I remember imagining the black tendrils reaching through her—Grandma, my grandma, the strong one, in the grips of some unfair curse of nature. She had never smoked, never lived with a smoker. I wanted to reach in to her and rip out the evil fingers, bite them out with my teeth, swallow it down sweetly, take part of the load. I wanted to choke.)

At some point after I hung up, I found myself in the compound's "library," a small shed disconnected from the house where we were staying. I stepped up to a built-in bookshelf that was at about waist-height. I gripped it with my fingers and heaved up, with all the strength of my legs and back, and snapped the shelf from the nails that held it down. My fingers blistered,

and white paint stuck to them in patches. I cried.

Sweet-Potato. BLACK-ROT (*Ceratocystis fimbriata*, Ell. & Hals.).—A dry-rot of the tuber, and a black rust upon the stems. Upon the tuber it appears in large scab-like patches, and is usually evident at digging time. It may appear upon the young plants in the hotbed and persist upon them throughout the season.

Remedies.—Rotation of crops. Spray the young plants, if attack is feared, with copper fungicides.

DRY-ROT (*Phoma Batatae*, Ell. & Hals.).—The upper end of the tuber becomes dry and wrinkled and bears a multitude of pimples, and its flesh becomes dry and powdery.

Preventative. —Destroy all affected tubers.

LEAF-BLIGHT (*Phyllosticta bataticola*, E. & M.).—Produces white, dead patches upon the leaves.

Remedy.—Spray with some of the copper fungicides.

SCURF (*Monilochaetes nigricans*, Ehr.).—The tubers rot with a soft and putrid decay. It is most destructive after the potatoes are stored.

Preventatives.—Store in a well-ventilated, artificially warmed room, at a temperature of about 70°. Store only sound and perfect tubers, and remove at once any which are attacked. [etc.]

L. H. Bailey, from *The Horticulturist's Rule-Book: A Compendium of Useful Information for Fruit-Growers, Truck-Gardeners, Florists, and Others*, New and Revised Edition (1895), 1898, pp. 73-4

Grandma struggled with the cancer for about two years, and in the spring of my first year in graduate school I got another call from my father, this time on my cell phone as I sat in my girlfriend's apartment in central Iowa. Dad sounded tired. "Your grandma's taken a turn for the worse," he said. "She's in a lot of pain, and Grandpa's driving her to Rush. It's hard to know whether she'll make it through the week. You might want to make it over here this weekend."

It was Friday afternoon. I thought briefly of the pile of fifty-two student papers I had to grade for the two comp classes I was teaching, and the couple books I needed to read for my own graduate classes over the weekend. And then I stopped. "Okay, I'll be there."

I told Rachael I was going, and she told me she'd go too. She started boiling eggs and

gathering other food for the road while I tried to figure out how much work I'd need to bring with me and looked up directions. I had never driven from Ames, Iowa to Elgin, Illinois before. But just the week before, I had visited them on the way out to Ames from my hometown in Michigan.

On that previous visit, when I walked into the den with Grandpa, Grandma sat in her upholstered burgundy leather chair, as she always had since I'd been alive, and she stood up to hug me when I walked in. Grandpa sat down in his upholstered *blue* leather chair, just on the other side of the end table from Grandma, as he always did. I sat on the couch across from them and asked her how she was doing. Her hair gave her a frazzled look; it was generally reigned-in and combed, but not curled, and little tufts sprouted out here and there. A machine stood against one wall, from which a plastic tube descended into a pile on the floor that trailed to Grandma's chair and ended around the back of her neck and into her nose. The machine whirred constantly and sent a regular *pissh* of air every couple seconds. She clearly was not fond of it, her smile flipping into a scowl when she spoke of it.

"It just makes me feel so weak," she said. "I don't feel bad, mostly—but I just hate being connected to this tube all the time—I really don't think I need it! But I don't know what I'm doing wrong . . . it seems like I should be getting better, but then I go and get these reports, and Dr. Benomi—he's *wonderful*—but I just don't want to go back. I don't want to hear about what's wrong anymore—can't they tell me something good?"

We reminded her that she had gotten a lot of good reports from the doctors, that she was doing exceptionally well for someone of her age (*you're a fighter*, we'd always remind her) and that this was just another rough spot between remissions.

"But I don't *want* another rough spot."

Later during the visit, Grandma had needed to lie down in my uncle Steve's bedroom, just off of the den. She could only maintain that sitting position for so long before it became too painful. Grandpa went to fix something in the kitchen, so I stuck around in the bedroom and talked with Grandma. She apologized for not being a better host, and I told her she was being silly. The oxygen machine pished along.

Eventually her experiences with the MRI machine came up in conversation. "I just hate going in there," she told me. She furrowed her brows and shook her head while she described it, not making eye contact. "It's so noisy... They send you down this tunnel, and it's cold, and the noise, like so much crazy metal spinning all around you..." She trailed off and looked back at me. "I hate it."

Grandma and Grandpa sent me on my way with a box of cookies, but they hadn't made them. They were a gift from friends of the family, probably church members from the parish my grandfather served as a pastor. I didn't eat any of them on the road, but I plugged in my MP3 player and switched to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, a favorite of Grandma's. The first movement is full of descending lines, culminating in a driving, incessant downward motif from the basses, that made me think of crevices opening in the frozen Illinois countryside, the whole state slipping into them like a tablecloth. I gripped the wheel hard. That gives way to a more fevered movement, which Beethoven labeled *molto vivace*, a tempo marking that literally translates into "much life." The sky was January-gray and I wondered at the two-year-long holding pattern that our family had been in. Two Thanksgivings before, while I was across the world in Namibia, Grandma had announced to the family from the head of the dinner table that it was her last Thanksgiving. After that she went into a long remission, and many of us stopped thinking about her temporality. It seemed like she was beating it, although we all knew that was

statistically impossible. *Much life.*

The third movement of Beethoven's symphony is the slowest—*adagio molto e cantabile*, indicating much slow smoothness and a singing quality. It seemed strangely out of place after the previous, more torturous movements, slowly building over the course of twenty minutes into a long climactic swell that then slowly faded again into soft warblings. It may sound cliché, but the clouds over Illinois did part early in the movement, letting down sunrays onto the cracked farmland where I had envisioned cataclysmic fissures. Then the final movement, split into four different tempo sections, vacillating constantly at first between major and minor keys, showing snatches of its famous melody tune until it finally takes over and the symphony culminates by breaking into sung poetry for the first time—"Ode an die Freude," Ode to Joy.



from *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture: A Popular Survey of Agricultural Conditions, Practices and Ideals in the United States and Canada*, edited by L. H. Bailey, Vol. II—Crops, 1907, p. 619

The weekend that I got the call from Dad, Rachael accompanied me to Illinois. She would again,

the following weekend, for the funeral.

Grandma looked small and baggy. In her hospital gown, we could see how the skin sagged away from the bones in her arms when she lifted them to hug us. Sometimes she seemed aware of everyone in the room, but typically she'd focus on one person at a time if she wasn't lost in another morphine-induced nap. When she had to move, she'd scrunch her brow and go wide-eyed in pain. We would take turns feeding her ice cubes with a spoon, as her appetite for anything but hydration dwindled. At one point she asked for music, so Sam went and found his headphones, connected them to Rachael's iPod, and set them on the pillow next to Grandma's head. She could hear George Winston's soft piano playing, an album called *December* set on repeat, as she slipped into and out of our conversations.

Only a certain number of people were allowed in the room at a time, so family members would come and go, sometimes hanging out in the lounge or the hall and talking about what we were all up to, as if nothing were different. One time I remember standing next to Grandma's bed with only a couple other people in the room, gently wiping her forehead with a damp washcloth to cool her off. Her hair stuck in every direction, and this made it worse, but she didn't seem to care anymore. I wasn't sure how to describe to Rachael how different she was. They had not met before. When I introduced them and told Grandma that this was the Rachael I had told her about, Grandma reached out and hugged her, and said, "Oh, she's so beautiful."

The family spent that night at the house in Elgin, sleeping in guest beds, on air mattresses, on the basement floor, and on couches. In the morning we left at all different times by the carful to head back to Rush Hospital in Chicago, where we repeated the ritual of the night before. Rachael and I still had a six-hour drive ahead of us, so we were the first to leave that afternoon. I hugged my grandmother and told her I hoped to see her again very soon. She shook

her head and said, “I don’t think so.” Then I leaned forward and kissed her, like I did as a child, a shy Scandinavian peck on the lips. She smiled, gripping my hand hard, and said, staring straight at me, “Don’t get into trouble.”

Here is the whole philosophy of the contented festival,—the fruit of one’s labor, the common genuine materials, and the cheer of the family fireside. The day is to be given over to the spirit of the celebration; every common object will glow with a new consecration, and everything will be good,—even the mustard will be good withal.

L. H. Bailey, from *The Holy Earth* (1915), 1917, pp. 91-2

After Grandma died that February, I worried about our next Thanksgiving. She had always been the axis of the event, seated during the meal at the head of the table nearest the kitchen, partially to allow her to get up and pass around another set of seconds or thirds or fourths whenever the spirit moved her. She linked us to Great-Grandma Larson’s recipes and traditions. She had passed on the sweet potato recipe, and she made the pumpkin pie.

When Thanksgiving finally came this year, we were a small group. Two family clusters could not make it, but the thirteen of us who were there did manage to prepare all the traditional food. The table was set as Grandma had always set it, with the old china and silver. We did not leave a gap at the end of the table, as I feared we might. Grandpa sat in Grandma’s place. He stood and said a few words before beginning the meal, emphasizing how fortunate we were to be together again, and how blessed he felt. He said he knew that Marcene’s influence was guiding him. His voice was shaky and his eyes wet, but when he sat down Uncle David and my cousin Victoria got up and immediately began passing the food.

Cranberries, rolls, stuffing, corn pudding, and asparagus all made their rounds. The turkey was especially tender, we all agreed. David and Heather did the cinnamon-nut version of

the sweet potatoes again, but we remembered the marshmallow recipe in passing, and laughed a bit about how several of us actually missed it.

If I were to make much more of Grandma's absence this year, I might be lying. Everyone, of course, felt it. Conversations sometimes lagged when she might have picked them up. Our banter occasionally picked up a sense of formality, sometimes felt a little less dramatic and fun. Her magnetic presence did not lure us into the den between meals to enjoy each other's company, but her absence did, and our heightened concern for each other. Not just our concern, but something about our general cohesion, something about the steps we were used to following, lapped up and filled in the gaping hole in the room. Our best moments this year seemed to be the ones when we did not try particularly hard to compensate for the loss, but simply did what we knew to do. They were not moments of innovation or especially emotive expression. It seemed as if the collective motions that had been set into motion decades, generations, in some cases centuries before, had been built to adapt to these tragedies. It made me wonder about how dramatic the shift must have felt when the family stopped having Thanksgiving at Grandma Larson's house and moved into my grandparents' house, when my dad was still young. I thought about Linstroms and Larsons I had never met, their parents dying, their yearly traditions shifting. I wonder who even started making those candied sweet potatoes in the first place. It might not have been so long ago.

Still, I wonder how much of the three-day reunion's success had to do with certain family members' specific efforts to make it go as smoothly as possible. Grandpa had made a big deal on the phone to his sons in the months preceding the gathering that we would do everything as it had always been done. He reorganized the den, moved the two upholstered leather chairs away from the wall where they had always stood and set them at angles on opposite sides of the room.

Different people filed through them both over the several days we were there.

And he took his seat in Grandma's old place at the table. At the end of the meal, after we passed around the pumpkin pie (which my caterer godparents replicated beautifully using the same two recipes Grandma used to combine), a couple people started whispering. "Don't touch the pie!" I heard one younger cousin scold another. "Grandpa gets the first bite!"

When Grandpa stepped in again from the kitchen and sat down, we all turned toward him. I worried that this would be another difficult speech. The room stayed silent for a moment. "Many of the tasks that fall to me are difficult responsibilities," he began, and lifted up a corner of pie on his fork. "This, however, is not one of them." He smiled, and we laughed, as he lifted the bite to his mouth.



Fig. 838.
Flowers and leaf of sweet-
potato (*Ipomæa Batatas*).

from *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture*, p. 613

Dear Bailey,

I want to tell you about a rough day I had. My girlfriend Rachael moved to Washington in 2011 for work, finishing her degree two years before me, so we'd been working for long periods without seeing each other (I know you know how that is), and that day we had a particularly difficult phone conversation. She put some question on the table that I still couldn't identify after we hung up, but as I thought about it, I realized the question was, *Are we as happy as we want to be right now, as we could be?* This is always a depressing question, always an important one to ask, and always lacking an answer.

I had been walking circles around my block in the historic district of Ames during the conversation, stopping to sit on curbs and lean against trees, occasionally gesticulating to the wind. I hung up in shambles. I walked to the local Culver's, where I had parked my bike a week before, thinking I'd take a bike ride out into the country to think things over or at least to feel in control of something, but the bike lock was jammed and the key wouldn't turn. I had lent my car to my housemate for the evening. I was stuck, walking fast and breathing heavy.

So I stopped by my friends Sarah and Patrick and asked if I could borrow a bolt cutter to liberate my bike. I dried my cheeks and held it together as I approached the door. They did not have bolt cutters, but Pat invited me to swing by in a bit and join them for falafel. I decided I had nothing better to do, and told him I'd go grab some beers from my place.

The fact just then evolving deep in my gut, although I could not name it, was that Rachael and I would break up soon. We had enjoyed a seemingly perfect partnership for a year and a half, some two-thirds of which had been spent 1,800 miles apart. We only talked once a week to catch up, because she was so busy over there. The relationship had become a

background thing for me, something to rely on, to look forward to. We would be together soon. I would graduate and come after her. Soon—that meant another year, but that meant we were halfway there. She would not come back, of course—Iowa depressed her, and she had more exciting things to occupy herself with over there. What this distance could not provide in passion it seemed to make up for in promise. Promise—we had not needed to promise each other anything.

I walked the few blocks back to my place to pick up the beers, taking the old gravel-paved alley that runs through the residential blocks parallel to my road. We had an eerily early spring that year, so the flowers had burst out early, and the first of several post-bloom frosts had hit, taking down many of the petals from the magnolia tree in our backyard. I knew, from the back window of the house, that the ground back there had become a battlefield of the tree's fallen petals.

When I reached the backyard, though, I had to stop and come to terms. The grass lay coated under a mat of bruised, pale pink magnolia petals. Around and behind the rotting picket fence at the back edge of our backyard, some fifty tulips, a scattering of aging daffodils, tons of tiny bluebells, and ferns galore burst through the petaled mat so that I could barely see the stepping stones our landlord had placed leading past the magnolia trunk and into our backyard. Above me the tree bent over the path, below me the smelly petaled mat, and flowers bent all around. The heavy smell of rotting magnolia petals mixed with the definitively live scent of the alert blooms. Even a few bees buzzed around, from flower to flower, like they were testing. Red, yellow, blue, green, like a kindergartener with Crayola markers had got ahold of the ground, it overwhelmed. The alley was quiet, no one could see me, and there alone I set my backpack down and wept.

This is not how things were supposed to go. “She’s so beautiful,” Grandma had said, holding Rachael’s hands in hers. Rachael wowed the family by making the two trips—one to see Grandma that last week, and the next the week after, for her funeral. The funeral had been lovely, and Grandma had arranged the whole thing, down to every last hymn. She was the one who passed the love of music on to her whole family, down to my brothers and me through my dad. She taught flute lessons and stayed at home through my dad’s childhood, and then later in life became involved in the Elgin Symphony Orchestra, taking charge as their Executive Director and raising the standard of excellence in that ensemble to great heights. A brass quintet from the orchestra played from the choir loft, and as I approached the front of the sanctuary and took one of the palls of the casket, my brothers and cousins on the others, the quintet broke out, in glassy brilliance, with Grandma’s favorite, Beethoven’s great Ode to Joy.

Rachael watched from one of the front pews, now sitting in an empty space left by our generation, as we processed down the central aisle, our whole family at our young backs.

Aunt Heather would later ask repeatedly when we’d be hearing wedding bells. After Phelipe, my only older cousin and older by a decade, there had been no Linstrom weddings. It looked like I was next in line. I scoffed at the suggestions, but I wondered too.

After the funeral, we all worried about Grandpa. He kept living at the house in Elgin, Illinois, with my Uncle Steve, who is disabled. I visited them on one of my trips back to Ames from South Haven, and told Grandpa that Rachael and I had broken up.

He did not seem to understand why. He became tired. This is not how things were supposed to go, I realized. Grandma’s picture, from some fifty years prior and slightly out of focus, gazed at us from the mantle where she stood at the edge of trees.

I do not know why I’m telling you this, Bailey. After all, you met Annette as students at

MAC, and after a long and sometimes distanced courtship, you married, and you stayed that way. “I never could look at another woman,” you said, sometime after her passing.¹⁸

What you had, what my grandparents had, I don’t know if I have ever had. But what scares me is the thought that maybe, at some point, I did.

What have we to depend on these days, my dear Bailey? You were part of that great movement of humanity at the turn of the last century to leave the farm, the neighborhood, the hamlet of one’s youth, to unbound the self from those loci of community like so many pages loosened from their spines and to enter into the life of floating un-homeliness that so much of industry and academe has trended toward.

Freud considered the un-homelike, the *Unheimlich*, to be the root of many of our notions of the gothic and terrifying. Bailey, you were part of this movement, yet you loved the commonplace, you missed the farm. Travelling in the tropics, you write that you realized something was missing, that you needed something that wasn’t there. “Yet one day,” you write, “it came over me startlingly that I missed the apple-tree,—the apple-tree, the sheep, and the milch cattle!”¹⁹ These were the trademarks of your South Haven childhood in that dusty past, and you recreated them at your summer retreat on Lake Cayuga, near Ithaca, which you would keep into your late years.

Lucky you, for being able to recreate it. Lucky you for finding and falling for a woman who you would stay with. Lucky you for being able to afford to keep living the agrarian dream on a scenic lake, on the funds of your successful book deals, your distinguished professorship, and your name. Lucky you for having a daughter who would help compile your thousands of herbarium specimens, who would write your late-life books without much credit or fanfare, who would care for you in your frail last years! Lucky you! Bailey, I don’t know how you would

have succeeded in the academic world without all that *luck*.

Did you ever stand over a mat of dying petals and realize that your world had gone? That your holy earth had gone all shaky and transient in the wind?

CHAPTER FIVE, FUCKAROO!

“I am glad that the earth is not all Iowa [...].”

L. H. Bailey, from *The Holy Earth*, 1915, p. 152

Up North, rivers lie like tapped veins in the hairy arm of a monster, crossing and recrossing over themselves, picking up in rapids and eddies, turning through walled corridors of sedimentary history, tearing over fallen trees and glacial boulders, emptying into the million calm lakes before spilling out the other side again, all racing as if away from the heart of civilization, or better maybe toward the heart of Canada, that Far North that exists beyond or among the big woods but that we do not count (not the cities anyway), due to its relative distance, the fact that we won't be heading in there except maybe a little way in by river, that we haven't brought our passports. So here, in the North Woods, we are not “south of the border,” not west of the Big Lake, but North, “up,” over all the centers of everything *but* the wilderness.

The drive had been long, from the heart of Iowa through the vast corn/soy plains and into the patchy woods and towns of Minnesota, settling into a midway campsite after dark and leaving before any ranger could ask a fee, continuing the drive up 61 along the north shore of Superior and then, finally, breaking off at Grand Marais and taking the old Gunflint Trail up through the ragged forest and the million million lakes to its very end and the campsite that was there. But it was worth it, we said. This was the escape we afforded ourselves, the way out of grading more composition papers, the weekend off from visible horizons, the break from grad school and the solace of the wooded dark. And we made it in time to meet the rest of the group before they pushed off.

I normally like to start this story on the river itself, but the truth is that, had I stayed on the river, none of it would have happened the way it did. We had all pushed off, a flock of uncoordinated amateur canoeists learning to communicate in our little pods of two and three, and I accepted the position of duffer in a canoe with Steve. But Steve, being the sometime-local, navigator, and most experienced canoeist, was the one who looked back to notice David still ashore with the last boat, lifejacket donned but no partner.

“Oh jeez, how’d we leave David?” Steve asked, smiling. Steve has this smile that makes him look absolutely unperturbed, a sort of gleeful scrunch that speaks of someone who knows how to find a way through whatever bemusing situation has confronted him. Back at the university, he seems to almost flick it on strategically in conversations about some of the most aggravating politicians in the English Department and the College, as if to say, from behind his silver specs, *oh you know her—she’ll be difficult*. I always found it comforting, the way he could take a situation that everyone found dire and then prove, in that full-face smile, that next to the big comedy of the world this little thing falls flat.

I also looked back to see David standing there, his hand lifted to shield his eyes, his orange lifejacket matching his hair, looking at us. Then Steve and I met gazes. “John, you can be David’s partner,” he said. “We’ve gotta turn around.”

This was fine, I thought. David and I would have plenty of time to catch up—most of the other canoes were still making loops, unable to steer straight. Plus, I thought, a canoe ride with David might be a perfect opportunity to start talking about my thesis. The thing weighed on me, even out in those woods. But as we turned back to shore, David turned back uphill and toward the parking lot, disappearing around a bend of trees. Still, surely not gone long. When we reached shore again, I disembarked—a little clumsily, I’ll admit—and Steve pushed back out

into the river with his partner.

As the fleet moved farther out, I noticed an extra pair of paddles near the shore. I glanced at the canoes, the way they spun around and made unanticipated detours to left and right before finding a straight line again. I could save time hauling the paddles back up now and meeting David in the process. I jogged up with the paddles, but there was no David, around the trailer or in the van. I spent several minutes prying the rusted paddle crate open in the middle of the eight-canoes trailer and then made my way back to the shore.

Still no David, but this time the sudden realization that there were no paddles in the canoe. Back up to the parking lot, running this time and cussing at the rusted crate, and a winded jog back toward shore, which was when I saw David making his way back, from the wrong direction, along the campsite loop road.

“Oh, hey John,” he said. “I thought everyone left already.”

I explained that they had, but that I was his partner. He looked a little upset and apologized—a little unnecessarily, I thought—and we commenced to shore.

The rest had gone.

“I should like to see a movement looking toward the better utilization of the forests humanly, as we use school buildings and church buildings and public halls. I wish that we might take our friends to the forests as we also take them to see the works of the masters. For this purpose, we should not go in large companies. We need sympathetic guidance. Parties of two or four may go separately to the forests to walk and to sit and to be silent.”

L. H. Bailey, from *The Holy Earth*, 1915, pp. 154-5

“So have you done this recently?” David asked. We were just about thirty yards offshore, rocking gently, and had completed our second 180-degree twist backward. He instructed me to stop paddling as he got us facing forward again.

“This is actually my first time,” I responded.

“Canoeing, ever?” I nodded. “Oh, wow,” he said, sort of softly. “Huh, that’s funny. You’re so outdoorsy though! Not to mention beardy.” He liked to call me beardy. “Weren’t you ever in Boy Scouts? It seems like I read that in your thesis.”

I contemplated this, pretty sure I hadn’t mentioned it in my thesis. “I guess we didn’t do as much as most troops,” I said. “I ended up in the boring troop of my town. We didn’t do much besides an annual camping trip at the Flywheelers Festival just outside of town. We always went to help park cars for them. But canoeing’s not as big a thing in southwest Michigan.”

“Oh, we’d go canoeing all the time with the Scouts in Georgia,” David replied.

The canoe was facing forward, so I asked him if I should start paddling again. He seemed irritated, I thought. I felt a little irritated with Steve. This was the first year that Steve, now on phased retirement, wasn’t teaching the required first-semester class in “Craft and the Profession of Writing.” It was supposed to be David’s class now, but already Steve seemed to be coopting the trip a bit and falling back into program-coordinator mode. It made sense—this was his territory; he was the expert—but then again that seemed all the more reason that he should have waited for David and me. Still, the sky was blue and the air piney, and once we figured out how to move straight we’d probably catch up with the group in no time. We’d stop at Seagull Palisades, do a writing activity, and eat lunch. My bread and peanut butter were in a friend’s bag up ahead, but nearly everyone else’s lunches and notebooks were in the big waterproof bag that Steve had left onshore and that David and I had now as a duffer between us. I smiled, thinking about how they wouldn’t be able to start eating without us.

As soon as I started paddling again, the canoe veered to port. “Oh dammit,” David said. His cusswords were usually tamer than that. “You know, how about if I just paddle for now until

we catch up? I'm fine doing this on my own; I just can't remember how to do it with two people."

I lifted my paddle out of the water, set it across the bow, and rested my arms on it. I could hear a woodpecker working on a tree somewhere. It was pretty easy to cool off in a setting like this. This is actually great, I thought. I decided to make the most of the morning, while my academic advisor began to huff behind me, alternating sides, pushing us toward the bend up ahead.

"I have asked person after person if he knew the song of the chipping-sparrow, and most of them are unaware that it has any song. We do not hear it in the blare of the city street, in the railway travel, or when we are in a thunderous crowd. We hear it in the still spaces and when our ears are ready to catch the smaller sounds."

L. H. Bailey, from *The Holy Earth*, 1915, p. 154

In a meeting with Steve a week or two earlier, the five of us second- and third-years who planned to join the group up North received the directions we'd need to unite with the class of first-years at the "End of the Trail" campsite.

This is one of the curious traditions that emerges from an interdisciplinary MFA program in "Creative Writing and Environment." No, that's not "Creative Writing and *the* Environment"—we wouldn't want the definiteness of that article—it's just "Environment." I found the program through a professor in college, and when I accessed their website found a quote from Lawrence Buell's book *The Environmental Imagination* (the one token of academic anchoring, which has since been taken down from the page, maybe because it wasn't exciting enough) and descriptions like "*An innovative MFA program at Iowa State University that fuses creative writing workshops, interdisciplinary coursework, and intensive field experience to help writers cultivate an understanding of the imprint of place, the natural world, and the environmental*

imagination on the poems, stories, and essays we create.” Springing out of the academic study of literary “ecocriticism,” this program would practice what the ecocritics preached, would use language to push the boundaries of how we understand our place in a world that remains for the most part emphatically non-lingual. Exciting, right?

But how do you do that? Apparently, you get a bunch of writers interested in “environment”—whether that means urban, rural, wild, or whatever type of environment—and get them together to write and workshop for a few years. It also means a class in ecocriticism and required coursework outside the English department in “environmental” areas, whatever those may be and however unrelated they might be from each other (mine ranged from art and material culture to sustainable agriculture to nineteenth-century history).

And, more pressingly (to those entering their last year of the three-year program), why do you do that? An MFA in Creative Writing and Environment doesn’t exactly come with a career track afterward.

So this annual trip is meant to provide both a bonding experience with your cohort of ten or twelve first-year MFAers as well as a shared “environmental” experience. It’s supposed to be perfect for us, and we (most of us) tend to love it, but it turns out that a gang of mostly soft-handed writers (maybe 75% of whom might enjoy camping) sometimes aren’t the most adept outdoorsfolk around. I remember spending an hour trying to get a Coleman stove working in the Badlands after dark and almost tripping and falling off a rock ledge on Harney Peak in the Black Hills. And then there was the made-up class “Writing in the Rockies with Rick Bass,” an excuse to go hang out with Rick in the Yaak Valley, that required reading just three of his books, writing one story or essay, and spending a lot of time hiking around and nearly getting killed with him. Like the time we had to send a girl back to the van from halfway up a mountain because she was asthmatic and having a hard time breathing. Or when, at the end of that hike, we sprinted down

the mountainside like a herd of frightened antelope because it was snowy and Rick thought it would be fun (it was). Or the time he intentionally instructed us to head off into the woods in different directions and try to get lost for an hour while he grilled elk burgers (also fun). Or the time on the drive back when one wheel of our university-rented trailer dislodged, rolled away down the road, and left the trailer scraping along with a mutilated axle in the middle of Plains, Montana, none of us with any idea about axles or wheels or how to rent a U-Haul.

So now the bonding trip would be the boundary waters instead of the Badlands, and five of us second- and third-years wanted in. After going through the driving directions, Steve described to us how we'd meet up with them at Seagull Palisades if they had already left by the time that we got there, and I wrote the notes down in full in my little pocket notebook. This was why, when David asked on shore how we'd find the rest of the group, I replied with confidence that Steve had given me directions.

The little notebook lay face-down and open on my leg as we drifted down the river, now somewhat in a straight line, and as we neared the bend in the river I lifted it, looked at the bend, and looked at the directions again. It wasn't actually so much a bend as a distinct Y. "Which way did Steve say to turn?" David asked.

"Well, it's not totally clear. He said to 'go straight and keep to the right,' and then we're supposed to go over 'a small rapids,' and Seagull Palisades will be the big rocks on the left. But neither of these look like 'straight' to me."

He didn't seem to absorb all of this. After a pause, he asked, "So which way do we turn here?"

I shrugged, looking down both forks of the Y. "He said to *go straight*, and *keep to the right*."

“Ah, the right! Okay,” David replied, suddenly sounding a little too cheery.

Sometimes I think you really can intuitively tell that a decision you’re making is wrong, but, because there’s no evidence to support the feeling, you’re likely to go through with it anyway. I’m not sure whether news of the existence of such intuition should come as comforting or depressing.

Our newly chosen branch of the river curved around a bend and soon we could no longer see the fork behind us. This is about the time we began to hear the rapids. David asked if I “could hear that,” and I responded that I could, and that the directions said we should go over “a small rapids.”

“What’s going over a rapids like in a canoe?” I asked David. I had heard of such things in relation to kayaks, but not really in conversations about canoes—let alone big heavy university-rented ones.

“Well, he said ‘small rapids,’ right? If you’re going *with* the rapids, it really shouldn’t be much trouble at all. You’ll want to look out for big rocks and try to push away from them, but don’t worry about it too much, because I’ll be steering anyway.”

I still had my red plastic paddle crossed over the bow of the canoe. “Alright,” I said. He was still working audibly behind me, and I felt a little guilty for not being a good enough canoeist to help us reach the others more quickly. I determined to be as helpful and positive as possible, although something about the gradual narrowing of the river and the continuing absence of any other canoe in sight made me uneasy. The sound of falling water grew louder. “So, I’ll just keep my paddle up unless you say something? Or maybe if I see something?”

Around the bend, from my perspective sitting at about water level, a flat line emerged over which the still river water disappeared. We seemed to be moving a little more quickly.

“Just don’t worry about it,” David said. I rocked forward onto my heels and lifted myself up a bit to try to see over the edge of the drop, which continued to emerge as we rounded the bend. Over the edge, the entire river transformed into a maze of currents that twisted around dozens of boulders. Damn, I thought, that’s bigger than I expected.

David noticed. “Wow, this will be fun,” he said. I sat back down and gripped my paddle harder.

Soon we could see that the flat line spanned the whole width of the river, and that the river continued on in a rapids like that until it disappeared again around a tree-topped ledge of rock. There wouldn’t be any walking around; the slopes of the river rose dramatically on both sides of us already. We could turn around, but that would be working against the slowly strengthening current.

The canoe rocked and I realized David had stood up to look. “I guess that’s the rapids, huh?” He shouted so I could hear over the water rush, and then he laughed, sort of shouting as he did. “I think we can shoot ’em!”

He steered us just to the right of a large boulder where the river rose and fell around it, and as the bow edged near the drop, I could see that the water fell some five feet. I gripped my paddle across the bow and started to lean backward.

David laughed again. “Are you ready?” he cried. I looked out, the rapids expanding to fill my entire field of vision, turning over every boulder and depression so unendingly it seemed almost static, glossed like blown glass but loud as a china shop emptied onto its own parking lot.

The water on either side lay flat. The sky hung still and bright. The trees shivered. And slowly, the canoe’s end pushed out, me in it, straight into the air, and began to tip forward.

We each yelled different things, I don’t remember what, as the bow tipped toward earth

and the hull began rolling at the same moment to starboard. As it did I lifted my right leg and stuck it out of the boat, crashing into the river and hitting slick bottom just as the canoe's stern swung out to the right behind me and splashed down the fall with David, who I turned around to see floating on his side in the river. I reached over to grab his small red cotton backpack before it got soaked, and the canoe, half full of water, righted itself.

"Fuck-a-Roo!" David shouted.

I pointed at the small, dark writhing things in the water of the boat, and asked David if they were leaches. There were probably a hundred floating in the boat, and then I picked some off from my exposed calves in the river. The water was above our knees.

David denied that they were leaches. I had never seen leaches, but they were leaches.

"It is supposed that the first life on the earth came forth where the land and the waters join, from that eternal interplay of cosmic forces where the solid and the fluid, the mobile and the immobile, meet and marry."

L. H. Bailey, from *The Holy Earth*, 1915, p. 169

David thanked me when I handed him his mostly dry backpack. "My lunch is in there," he said. "Triscuits and deviled ham."

"Deviled ham?"

"Thought I'd try to share some with the vegetarians in the group." He smiled.

I looked back upriver, which was weirdly close to eye level beyond the boulder behind us. I looked at the steep slopes on either side of the river. I looked downriver, at the continual rapids that we still couldn't see the end of. And I looked at David, who was looking at the same things. "Well, there's no turning back," he said. He looked down at the canoe with the leaches. "And the good news is . . . that didn't really count as a dump! Everything's still in the canoe."

And for a moment I was actually glad that, of all people, I was stuck in the rapids with David Zimmerman. David's one of those guys who tends to make awkward people feel comfortable. He speaks out of turn, asks inappropriate questions about significant others, and tells self-deprecating stories about subjects like toe fungus. And like Steve, he tends to see the funny side of things. It makes sense that the two of them ended up as pals, even though as a pair standing side-by-side in the North Woods they look sort of like a good-humored old fur trapper next to an enthusiastic middle-aged comic book collector. I reflected that, had I still been in the canoe with that fur trapper, I may have never have ended up in these rapids in the first place (I suspected we might have taken a wrong turn). But now that we were here, the comic book collector would probably prove the more entertaining companion, if only because he might have less sense of the danger we were in.

I wondered how much danger we were in.

We got onto either end of the canoe and rotated it so that most of the water poured out, and then reentered, which the rapids made difficult. We weren't in for more than a few seconds, moving forward, before the canoe swung around another boulder and tipped again, spilling both David and I this time into the river and filling up halfway again.

"It is one of the marks of the evolution of the race that we are coming more and more into sympathy with the objects of the external world."

-L. H. Bailey, from *The Nature-Study Idea*, 1903, p. 14

"Oh, fuckaroo!" David said. He didn't smile anymore. "This is bad." We emptied the canoe again, and placing everything inside we began the slow process of walking it through the rapids, David holding the painter at the bow and I hanging onto the stern, picking our way among the algae-slick boulders and through the insistent roaring current.

This was not the river we had entered only half an hour ago. That river was glassy blue and cut by reflections of sunlight and treetops, clear so that you could lean over the gunwale and spot the mindless-looking fish float by, and with my paddle across the bow I could enjoy the sounds of woodpeckers and the occasional breeze through the pines. This river, on the other hand, was boulders up to my neck and the white crashes around them, eddies where the current got confused swirling clear and deceptive, and an invisible underwater carpet of algae coating a million rocks, fist-sized but jagged, “ankle-breakers.” The current twisted around our shins and kneecaps like anacondas, strong but smooth, egging us on.

So we continued, David issuing a periodic stream of “fuckaroo’s” from the front of the boat as he slipped along, more and more regularly losing his footing and falling into the rapids, and me in back trying to learn from his mistakes and keep upright as much as possible but constantly feeling inadequate in my ability to support him. I became more aware of our age difference, and started to worry more about his ability to physically weather these rapids than about my own ability to make it out, and about how long it had been since *he* had been on a canoe trip like this. We grew hungry. David spoke repeatedly of how hungry he was, and of how much he looked forward to finding everybody and tearing into that box of Triscuits. “The Triscuits and the deviled ham,” he’d say. And, of course, we told each other a lot of lame jokes to make the time pass more easily, most often returning to the old one about how at least things couldn’t get worse.

“Oh my god, look,” he said at one point, and pointed to the bank on the right. Pine trees stood silently some forty feet up—I didn’t see anything. “I know where we are,” he said, still pointing. He recognized the bank; we were just below the place that the first-years had camped the night before. We had long since admitted to ourselves that we had taken a wrong turn.

“That’s a relief. At least now I know I can get us back.” Up ahead the rapids finally emptied into a wide still lake after a few more significant passages—so, once there, we could safely beach the canoe and make our way back up to the campsite, which as it turned out we had barely ever left. At the edge of the lake I could see where it emptied into another narrow stream that turned and made its new way farther into the woods.

And at about that time two blonde-headed girls, aged maybe seven and ten, emerged from around the edge of the lake opening, skipping and climbing over the rocks along the bank. Their long hair wagged behind them, and in my memory they wore matching white dresses. “Jesus, look at that,” David said. I laughed, just long enough that I could regain focus again on the task of not slipping, but when I looked back up and saw them again I couldn’t help laughing again. David did it too, and we alternated with these sort of painful, short bursts of laughter. The two girls could not hear us from where they were over the rapids’ din, but they stopped to watch us briefly once before heading back, probably thinking we were two adults who knew what we were doing.

We finally reached the last major drop before the rapids spread out and reached the lake. The tangled limbs of a fallen tree blocked the left side, and to the right sat an unreasonably large boulder. The only sensible spot to descend was in the middle in a horseshoe-shaped step between the boulder and the tree, but the current was the strongest we had yet felt as we neared the boulder, and the water below the horseshoe roiled as it fell from all sides. The ground beneath us also declined, or the water rose, as we neared the boulder, so that David and I were both waist-deep, and the current pulled hard on the hull of the canoe. “Fuckaroo,” David muttered, keeping a safe distance as he peered over the edge.

I think what happened next was that I wanted a look too. This was the largest drop that

we'd have to step down, and I didn't feel confident that my legs were long enough to do it, let alone while hanging onto a canoe that wants to whisk away and spill the contents of several other people's bags into the rapids, all while trying not to slip myself on the algal stones and crack my head against them in the process. My legs were already shaking to strain against the current.

That was when I led the stern of the boat around to the right of David so that I could at least judge the drop for myself. Maybe I stepped too close, maybe I became distracted by more leaches on my legs, or maybe the turning of the boat perpendicular to the rapids would have caused it either way—but I lost my grip. I staggered on the stones, and as the boat started to do a 180 right there by the drop I realized I couldn't keep up with the stern. It tugged away, and I let it go. David held onto the painter but was nearly toppled as it swung right and then, smack against the big boulder, flipped entirely upside-down, half over the fall and suctioned tight to the diagonal falling water, our bags and paddles floating in the air bubble below it, and David, teeth clenched and feet tenuously planted, leaned backward like he was playing tug-of-war with the painter.

"Not good!" David said. He glanced around, holding the painter. He shimmied to one side of the canoe, then to the other. He looked down at the water that was too fast to see and took a breath. "I mean, we just have to right it."

I no longer understood why this was the case. The lake was a stone's throw away—we could see its glassy stillness and the green ring of forest around it (and I imaged some really magnificent Seagull Palisades off to the left where we couldn't see them)—and without the boat we'd be able to make it much more easily. Once in the lake I figured we could fix everything, swim and retrieve the boat if it floated too far, whatever, but we had to get down this fall somehow first. Let the thing go, I thought—give up—the river wins the boat!

Instead, David grabbed the gunwale, worked his way around to the boulder side, and tried to lift it. Against the boulder, the water reached well up his stomach, and I saw or imagined the water curving up around the gunwales to maintain the suction of the air bubble. David leaned back, wedging himself between the rock and the boat, strained against it, sighed. “Try to grab from the other side and pull toward you,” he said.

I don’t know if I’ve honestly ever felt so incompetent. I tried. I reached over the hull, tried to get some kind of grip on the gunwale, but couldn’t do barely anything beyond what David in his curled wedged position was doing. I did get hold, I did pull, but I had no good footing and ultimately it was mostly David who pried it up.

It happened with a sloppy pop. The canoe flipped back for a moment into canoe position, and we had it as if frozen in time, floating there as if above the rushing water at that crazy diagonal over the crest of the drop—but the current and gravity had it too, and it was stock full of water. It took off, and, still without good footing, as I teetered I let it go.

The entire canoe plunged downward, and my academic advisor went down with it. Boat and David vanished. The boat came up first. I could not see David, but the painter was still underwater. Downstream, one of the plastic paddles snagged on a fallen tree, and in the middle of the stream, as if framed there, the red cloth backpack with the Triscuits. I did not panic as much as I should have. I mechanically scanned the drop—the slickness of the rocks, the depth, the height of the drop as compared to the length of my leg. For several seconds, the amount of water that poured over that ledge must have been immense.

L. H. Bailey was a world-explorer into his nineties. He travelled far and wide, from deep Amazonia to inner China, to collect and catalogue plants in the name of systematic science. This is not so different from a writer who travels far and wide to write and document the world in

poetry—in both cases, at some point, you probably start to wonder what the point is, whether all your findings printed on so much paper and all the life-energy you sacrifice really add up to a true job, an occupation with meaning and weight. No one asked Bailey to document the palms or the raspberries or the sedges, and he did not accrue wealth from those pursuits. And many times, on rough sea voyages or, I imagine, on long canoe trips in the Amazon, his possibly gratuitous exploits (he admitted that he reveled in the adventure, that he did it out of a personal love for and obsession with plants and cataloguing them) certainly endangered lives, and not just his own.

Staring at the white water at the edge of the drop, I did not know what to do. If I jumped down, I guessed I would probably die. I did not know that, in another twenty minutes, I might have picked over the last thirty yards of rapids and gathered most of the things that had spilled from the canoe. I did not know that the back seat and one of the thwarts of the canoe had each cracked in two against stones on the river's bottom and that the hull had very nearly stove through in its subaquatic voyage, that I might help lead the busted-up canoe and our soggy belongings around the bend and onto the shore, noticing the unsettling number of large fish passing between my legs and then a sign that read "NO FISHING OR SWIMMING -- SPAWNING AREA." I did not anticipate lying on the shore beside my academic advisor as we both rested our tired limbs beside the broken canoe, nor that we would discover that all the lunches and notebooks in Steve's "waterproof" bag would be soaked. I could not imagine all those soaked pages, the ink run amok, no longer notebooks of writers but slabs of soggy pulp, water-consumed language. I did not visualize the way Steve's eyes would bulge a couple hours later when we described where we had gone, that he would laugh and tell us no, those weren't rapids, they were falls.

Underwater, David lost sense of direction. Many pounds of water thrust him down and his head struck against a rock. He would later describe two thoughts in that instant: the first, *What will happen to John if I die?* and the second, a memory from Boy Scouts, *go limp and let the current take you*. He instantly relaxed, and after what felt like half a minute the river carried him in a surge to the surface.

So David's orange hair emerged, followed by his flush face, his sunglasses gone, T-shirt bunched up around his chest and back revealing long scratches rubbed out of his sides by rocks. He might have simply breached like that and fallen back, but a single foot caught something solid, then the other. He jerked to a stop, spluttered and looked around, teetered. He didn't make eye contact, and he didn't look for words. The empty canoe trailed lazily behind him, the painter still in his hand. He almost lost his balance, and he sat down on a rock.

"Fuck," he said plainly, and moaned. "The Triscuits."

Dear Bailey,

I'm sorry that your Background Books set wasn't popular. I kind of caught the frustration in a few of the side-comments you sometimes make in those books. Like:

In [*The Holy Earth*] I endeavored to present an earth-philosophy, although many readers seem to have found it only an enthusiasm for the out-of-doors. I attempted no less than to suggest a change in the view-point of life, which any person may embrace whether or not he has natural-history knowledge. –*Universal Service*, 1918²⁰

[T]his is not a detached book. Out of an experience not inconsiderable grew the desire to attempt certain Background Books. The first of these was "The Holy Earth." Out of that effort grew "Universal Service." I mistrust there are other imperfect fruits still to garner. [...] There is one philosophy in these writings; it finds its quintessence in *Wind and Weather*, albeit apparently no one discovers the fact. –*What is Democracy?*, 1918²¹

This subject is discussed in the article "Candytuft" (the most important chapter in the book, but which will be the least read). –*The Garden Lover*, 1928²²

I want you to know I loved the essay "Candytuft." The patterns and meanings that emerge from the arc of *Wind and Weather* fascinated me. *The Holy Earth* opened me to whole new ways of thinking about the earth, ethics, and our kinship with the nonhuman. Or at least it gave voice to more nebulous ideas that had been growing in me.

When you published *What is Democracy?*, critics of the book accused you of irresponsible "armchair-writing," that you had "kept [your] feet up by the fire." I want you to know I found it moving. It's the angriest I've ever read you, and so incisive. I don't think even you could have written it with your feet up the whole time. You knew you had the tools, the capacity, to take down war-mongering for what it is, and you did. You had that way about your rhetoric that kept accusations at arm's-length, an impenetrable wall of reasonable and antipartisan critique. I think the positivism played an important role; every book ended with some kind of game-plan, even if that just meant something as vague as a revision of the social

outlook—and it always seemed manageable. You spoke about the reorganization of the westward-expanding highway system in 1915 as if you’d absolutely be listened to, at least.

But you weren’t too interested in politics, and I wonder if that’s why people didn’t listen. Or why they didn’t act. Or maybe it wouldn’t have helped either way.

Okay—but here’s some good news. Here’s the wondrous news that you’ve been dying for since you died.

You’ve been read, Bailey. *The Holy Earth*—the “little book” you thought to be your best work, underappreciated in its day (and certainly still today)—influenced a forester named Aldo Leopold who would become a very big name in environmental ethics. Your “morals of land management”²³ became his “land ethic.” For that humanity can thank you. And the thread has been picked up again in the writing of Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Fred Kirschenmann,²⁴ all of whom give you space in their published books. And other scholarly-types have taken interest—Ben Minteer seriously wants to bring you back into the picture, and I hear he’s working on a whole book about you as a pragmatist philosopher. James A. Montmarquet has written that “if there is a single ‘solution’ to be found to the problem of formulating a viable agrarian philosophy today, its main lines are to be found in Liberty Hyde Bailey’s writings and philosophy.”²⁵ Congrats. That’s pretty high praise—and his treatment of Berry’s work is, by contrast, not so rosy.

But Bailey, I have to imagine there were times you felt afraid. Afraid that us humans were maybe going down the wrong path, for one. In so many of your books you lean so heavily on the progress that had been made and the responsible direction you saw society headed—gathering stage, mining stage, and now into the producing stage, the stage of responsible stewardship!—that I wonder if you were compensating for doubt. Or maybe you were just being

your pragmatist self, hammering in the vision of progress you had so that, maybe if you said it enough times in enough ways, we'd all get swept up in it and go that way, adopt that outlook. That would seem to separate us. I find I often can't help mentioning all the scary things around the corner—it's harder to be optimistic now than it was for you, I think.

But clearly you saw what might happen. You saw the possibility of 5,000-acre farms leading to the garbling of democracy. "It is said," you wrote in *The Harvest*—in 1927!—"that in the future we are to have corporation farms of 5000 acres and more. Perhaps; this prophesy regards farming only as an industry. If so, the world will be ruled entirely by corporations, agricultural, industrial, commercial, professional, for the corporations would control government: we shall have a government of corporations rather than persons. . . . and democracy, as we now conceive it, will be difficult or impossible."²⁶ Did you shudder as you wrote those words? You dismissed the notion of the corporate-controlled farm as wrong and undemocratic, but I wonder if you felt a keen sense of dread as you set those words down in cursive, maybe the lettering losing some of your characteristic sweep, becoming more cramped, as you imagined the possibility. All those rows of corn and soy, with so few buildings or signs of human or wild life—I wonder if you saw anything like it in your day, or if it just existed as a phantom in your imagination. I wonder if it ever kept you up at night.

I know it wasn't fair to pull out those sort of funny, frustrated block quotes earlier, but they do tell me one thing—you knew frustration. Your best books did not sell as well as your gardening manuals, and you knew it. That seems to work against, at least at some knee-jerk level, the calm poise you adopt regarding social transformation in *The Holy Earth*, in another section that gives me shivers. I wonder if you'd remember it without my quoting. You were describing "the new hold," the new outlook to nature that you saw emerging in the most

promising human developments of your day. “This will come slowly,” you wrote, “ah, yes!—slowly. The people—the great striving self-absorbed throng—they do not know what we mean when we talk like this, they hear only so many fine words. The naturist knows that the time will come slowly,—not yet are we ready for fulfillment; he knows that we cannot regulate the cosmos, or even the natural history of the people, by enactments. Slowly: by removing handicaps here and there; by selection of the folk in a natural process, to eliminate the unresponsive; by teaching, by suggestion; by a public recognition of the problem, even though not one of us sees the end of it.”²⁷

This is a beautiful passage in some ways. “The naturist knows” that a century is less than the blink of an eye, that humans don’t know squat compared to mountains, that the seas will roll and the winds blow, and that life in fact will persist and flourish in one form or another long after our extinction. And the optimistic humanist-naturist like yourself knows how many generations it takes for a society to mature, for the “natural history of the people” to evolve.

But um, Bailey, listen. I’m afraid we might be short on time all of a sudden. You didn’t know terms like season creep, global warming, and shifting baselines. You had no idea that the seas and the skies themselves could be endangered as much as they are. Would you stick by your words today? More pressingly—would you stick by your method for worldview change?

You wanted to effect change by shifting the public outlook. “I have no new or sudden program,” you wrote, “but I hope for a gradual shift in the point of view.”²⁸ You didn’t state that lightly, I know—the way you frustratedly described *The Holy Earth* as promoting “no less than [...] a change in the view-point of life”—whatever that really means. This all is why a couple professors interested in promoting sustainable agriculture, Paul Morgan and Scott Peters, have lifted you up as the perfect example of someone dedicated to facilitating “worldview

transition”²⁹ (a current catch-phrase that sounds strikingly reminiscent of your “change in the view-point of life,” no?). They seem to agree that the best way to effect change in the current environmental paradigm is to start from the ground up, to create new vocabularies and new stories to help us navigate this new world. Social mores must evolve; regulations alone can’t stem the tide.

That’s what you did in the wake of evolution-teaching. You were Darwin’s biggest fan, and you set out to create a new way of speaking about religion, philosophy, and morals that rooted itself in evolutionary biology and the new world-order that it created. You were right in there with John Dewey and all those cool pragmatist cats, but you were operating more in the area of real people, of farmers and readers of agricultural bulletins, and of children. In every publication, the 65 personal books, the 150+ edited works, the hundreds and hundreds of articles and nature-study bulletins and speeches, you imbued your very personality with the new mythology. And I think you made a difference.

Bailey, I guess that’s what every earnest student of literature and writing wants to do as well, at least in their most ambitious and compassionate moments (for compassion is an act of great ambition, isn’t it?). But does it really work? You vehemently refused to run for office, despite the fact that you were absolutely cut out for it. You were a legendary administrator—you could have been a great governor of New York. And didn’t you at least consider the possibility that you might have made a bigger difference? You could have had a hand in *policy*, Bailey!

In *The Holy Earth*, you extolled the “independent soul,” stating that “[n]ever have we needed the independent soul so much as now.”³⁰ You lifted up the example of Muir. You actually seemed worried that we might be losing that breed of person. “In some way we must protect the person from being submerged in the system. We need always to get back of the

group to the individual. The person is the reason for the group, although he is responsible to the group.”³¹ And, I note, you did not write anything of the scope and ambition of that book until after retiring from Cornell, then just barely into your fifties! But the time spent at the institution, supporting yourself—Bailey, I wish I could ask you straight—was it time well spent?

I’ve been caught in academia for nearly my whole life, and until recently I showed no signs of stopping. But you get tired. (Most of us do—did you ever get tired Bailey? You were a workhorse!) And after going straight into an MFA, at the end of my third year in that program, twenty-five years old and never out of school since preschool, I applied only ambitiously. I applied to PhD programs in literature. Nowadays you can’t get a good teaching job with an MFA anyway, until you’ve published a book. I applied to six programs, Bailey, including one at your Cornell—dear Bailey, I so wanted to go to Cornell, to be nearer you, to be near all those sixty-some boxes of archival material!—and I received six rejections.

The wording of the last one, from Virginia, struck me. I got an impersonal email (no surprise) that wouldn’t admit to me what they had decided—I had to log in to the application system separately from the email—and the rejection on the application website read:

3/21/2013

John Linstrom
922 Wilson Ave
Ames, Iowa 50010

Dear John:

We have thoroughly reviewed your application, the supporting papers submitted on your behalf, and the recommendation made by the department to which you have applied. I regret to inform you that on the basis of this joint consideration, we are unable to approve your admission to graduate study.

Graduate education is characterized by extremely small classes and close mentoring by faculty. As a result, programs have only a limited number of available positions. Each year we receive many more applications than can be accommodated; consequently, we are unable to admit many highly qualified students.

Sincerely yours,



Philip Zelikow
Associate Dean for Graduate Programs

I guess the thing that struck me about the second paragraph was that, as if to offer an excuse, as if Philip Zelikow were embarrassed to reject so many people, he offers that universal statement: “Graduate education is characterized by extremely small classes and close mentoring by faculty. As a result, programs have only a limited number of available positions.” Look, he’s saying, the system is such that good scholars very likely won’t get in. And we don’t want anyone teaching courses in literature who hasn’t been through that kind of impossible system.

I only applied to six programs—I “only” spent around \$350 of my grad-student monthly stipend on application fees—so, of course, I didn’t expect to get in. But I wonder about this system. Is there really so little demand for courses in literature that the odds of a passionate person being *permitted* to teach them are so low? This is not merely a matter of quality control—it’s a frightening lack of market demand. I wonder if the humanities could learn from the sciences and consider some extension teaching. Shouldn’t the state fund programs that foster love of life and communication, exercise of the mind for the sake of mental health as much as anything else, as well as programs that foster soil conservation? Isn’t conservation somewhat dependent on an ethical and artistic outlook anyway? Didn’t you tell us, Bailey, oh pioneer of the extension system, that this was true, over a hundred years ago? How have we progressed?

I cannot end this letter without acknowledging another passage from *Universal Service* that has been challenging me to hope lately. That’s maybe ultimately what gives your writing so much staying power for me, Bailey—the way you can nudge me along without answering a question straight. Fascinating for such a narrative, religious approach to come from so great a scientist. You wrote:

What I suggest may never come to pass: this is not my responsibility. Yet the thinking of one generation is the practice of the next generation. In the end, government, or the organization of society, is the expression of the hope and the practical idealism of the people it represents. Our forecasts may seem to be utopian; very good: this is the road on which we must travel.³²

I am not living in an easy world to navigate. I really do want to trust you on this.

But where do I go now? I'm stuck in limbo and *have* no clear "road on which I must travel." I'm stuck in the North Woods with no sense of direction. The world is wilder maybe than I ever thought, and suddenly I realize that your books had accounted for that all along, despite all your steady assuredness. I look behind me, and my advisor has vanished from the canoe. No one is steering.

CHAPTER SIX, KITCHICHANG

The mind of God—where do we begin? It is all we want to know, but the thoughts that run across God's face are so spangled we can scarcely make sense of them. So maybe we write them off, content ourselves with knowing that God's emotions are not human emotions at all, are rather the exacting Laws of Tchibekana, the Galaxy on High. In the end, this is the more comforting thought, that death and beauty might find their places in this lawful code.

What we do know is that Kija Manito did not end with his royal throne Kitchiwik and the charming stones.

The next morning, the animals saw Kija Manito bent and kneeling in sawkaw, the forests along the shore, planting the loveliest flowers that had ever bloomed on Earth. Some animals ventured close enough to catch him crying silent tears, which the flowers, they believed, drank.

These flowers were too beautiful, too good for names. People would name them, however, and as the people changed the names did too. You might know them. Milkweed, Trout Lily, Trillium Red and White. Ginseng, Meadow Rue, Waterleaf and Columbine. Hundreds of flowers, each different, the Great Spirit kneeling over each one by one.

And after he planted, he spread his arms and filled the trees with birds.

It is also true that Kija Manito fashioned the great mitigwa, the powerful bow at least two arrow flights in length. It was atop Ishpeming, that highest point of dune on the neck of land lying between MawKawte, the Black River, and the Lake Mishigan, that he would work out the great conceptions of kitchichang—of his soul.

Do we know what these conceptions were? We do know that, as Kija Manito worked at fashioning the great mitigwa, the skies to the west, over Mishigan, darkened. The bow lay

massively along the lake shore, and just as dark bands advanced across the water, so Kija Manito painted his bow from end to end with beautiful lines of many colors, outshining even the countless stones lying along the beach. He did not turn to see the advancing bands of dark, but painted there, fixed.

From the sun, as it set behind the ranks of cloud, a cyclone descended, pulling from Mishigan a tower of water to lead the storm. Light had left, but still he painted. Wawsaw mowin flashed across wawkwi—lightning across the heavens—curling in wild arcs behind the cyclone. Anamika with tigowog, thunder with rolling waves now reached the shore, and the concert rolled its awful burden on the land.

Not until the first great wave hit did Kija Manito drop his brush and turn to meet the storm. The earth shook and the high dunes slumped against the mitigwa, forming there a wide bluff. He stood before that bluff, his hair and eyes gone wild. He saw the disturbance on the lake face advance, and then the hail and rain beat against him. But as Ishpeming trembled and the sands about him whipped, in his majesty, Kija Manito stood smiling in the teeth of the storm.³³

CHAPTER SEVEN, *ARS POETICA*: ON BULLSHIT

I.

I sat cross-legged on a pillow, in front of a bunch of candles burning in a sandbox, in an old gym with a muralled ceiling set in the heart of Railroad Creek Valley in the Cascade Mountains of Washington, thinking of pebbles. Pebbles and water.

This was back when Rachael and I were still together. I had brought her here, to this retreat in the mountains where my parents had met, where my family had escaped to so many times when I was growing up.

Sitting there by the candles in the sandbox, I juggled two conversations in my head. Conversation One: Rachael and I had started a thus far inconclusive conversation-turned-argument a month before, regarding the term bullshit. We had been discussing a classmate who we both knew, and she said something like, “Yeah, I think he’s pretty full of shit.”

We laughed. “It’s a skill, I guess,” I said. “Definitely comes in handy if you can bullshit your way through a class you haven’t read for.” This was meant as a joke. I did say something about how grad school reading loads—sometimes three full books a week, on top of grading your 52 student papers and writing your own book—seemed generally impossible to keep up with. “But still, it’s annoying when you’ve done the reading and you’re in the class with a loudmouth bullshitter,” I added. I suggested that sometimes you just want the person to pull out a hankie, wipe, and let the rest of us talk.

And that was the moment when Rachael said the unexpected: “Well, that’s what you need to be a really good professor, I guess.” I asked her what she meant. “I mean, look at Prof. Kilgore—he’s a great bullshitter. You could bring up just about anything in class and he’d be

able to tie it back to the reading or the topic. I think that's a real skill."

I told her I thought the term she meant was something like "synthesizer" or "critical thinker," not "bullshitter." I also knew that she respected Kilgore as an instructor—this is what confused me. I told her that calling someone "full of shit," even if jokingly, has negative connotations. I couldn't figure out at first if she was being playfully cynical or serious, but she responded earnestly. She truly believed that a good academic must be, to some extent, "full of shit."

I asked her if she thought I was full of shit when I wrote research papers for lit classes about Bailey—academic papers, utilizing precise, concrete language, about L. H. Bailey, my hero, the object of my obsession, my geographical ancestor who grew up less than a mile from my parents' home. Did she think my research, my argumentative essaying about Bailey's historical, social, and literary significance, was "full of shit?"

She paused, not wanting to upset or offend me, but responded, "Yes."

Conversation Two: the scene is South Haven, the Packard Park beach parking lot, summer 2010. Emily Verdonk and I, beach parking attendants working for the city, have been cruising along the line of smaller north-side public beaches (divided as they are by the private shorelines of condos and other summer homes), checking parking meters and the old yellow payment boxes, carrying our "chalkers" made of white PVC pipe and the rubber tubes of cheap bike handles that we use to swipe a line of chalk across the back tire of every car that has paid its five bucks for the day. We've reached one of our frequent (increasingly frequent on hot days like this one) points of disagreement in conversation. I don't recall the issue or why I disagreed with her, but I explained that I didn't do something the way she was describing it. Her response, the only thing

I remember about the conversation, she worded as if I weren't there: "Well, of course *John Linstrom* wouldn't do it that way. That's how everyone else does it, so *he* would certainly find some *other* way."

Birds chirped; the lake lapped. My teeth clenched. Emily and I had become accustomed to disagreeing with each other—that's sort of how our friendship works: we spend time together; we share some similar interests regarding music, literature, and politics; we certainly share friends and shared stories; but within an hour of a typical conversation I've probably become annoyed with how she's wording things or representing something and I usually let her know that. We don't mince words. I think she has a tendency to say some things without thinking, and when she does, I want to clarify, to figure out whether we actually disagree (often the case) or if there's been an error in communication. It's just words—all conversation is—but didn't Toni Morrison tell us, in her Nobel Prize speech, that "oppressive language does more than represent violence," that in fact "it *is* violence"? But when Emily said that, I lost it. I felt like a toddler—I began walking more quickly to outpace her and stopped talking to her for the rest of the shift. I told the story to my parents and brothers when I got home that night; I told friends the story throughout the week. Had Emily always thought this about me, that I disagree with her for the sake of contrariness? That I get into heated discussions with friends, family, and others, out of some stupid desire to pick a fight?

I still tell people that story. I've always worried about what people think of me, what kind of person they think I am. You might call that self-conscious of me. You might think that I've set myself in the bondage of other people's opinions, that I'll never be able to be my own person when I'm constantly worried about what others think. Well, if that were the case, Emily would take less fault with me. I *do* think about how others will perceive me, and I'll stubbornly

defend that impulse to the end. It's an instinct of compassion, of seeking community and *not* trying to alienate yourself.

I get worked up in conversation with Emily because she's my friend. Several other close friends, including my mother, have strongly encouraged me for years to find some way to cut off my friendship with Emily, due to conversations like that one at the Packard parking lot. But even if we didn't have so many mutual friends in South Haven, we have history. She's funny and pretty, and for a long time when we were high school classmates I was attracted to her. We went through the kind of short fling when we first knew each other that leaves you thinking for years afterward that maybe you could handle a second try, that all you'd need is one more go at it. We've long since hardened against any such possibility, I think, but the legacy remains. When I'm in town, she's one of the first people I call to see who's around, after Neil and Jared. And when we disagree, I want to know who's right. Sometimes I'm pretty sure I am, but often enough I have no idea where she's coming from and want to find out, to see if I can learn something.

Point being, yeah, we're friends. But she, like Rachael, posed a serious threat to probably the thing I have most taken for granted about myself, the characteristic that I most identify myself with and that I tend to consider one of my strongest personality traits. It's something about the slowness that I take to process information, the solitary walks I like to take to mull over the underlying principles of simple observations and the stress I go through navigating personal relationships, the reason each of my parents used to call me "sensitive" when I was growing up, each of them emphasizing it for a different reason. Thoughtfulness, academicism, daydreaminess—whatever you want to call it. What Emily called into question was whether that characteristic part of me made me full of shit. And then, a year later, Rachael *told* me that I *was*.

Holden Village was founded when a rather unsavory middle-aged man who smoked too much asked the Howe Sound Mining Company to donate their abandoned mining village in the middle of the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area of Washington to the Lutheran Church. Wes was active in the Lutheran Bible Institute at that time, and he just figured the Lutherans could make it into some kind of nice camp.

The mining company had been asking \$100,000 for it. In its remote location, however, and with little incentive for another mining operation to attempt to take it over, it didn't sell well. Howe Sound would not donate, but after three letters from Wes—the first two unanswered—they agreed to sell it to him for one dollar in 1957. Thus, Holden Village as a Lutheran Retreat Center was born.

“Remote” might be an understatement. To get there, first you need to make it to Chelan, Washington, a small town at the end of Lake Chelan, a long and deep glacial finger lake. Get a hotel room there, or pitch your tent on the lawn at Field's Point Landing, some ten miles of curvy mountain road uplake from Chelan. Then, at 10:30 the next morning, be ready to board the Lady of the Lake at Field's Point, and the old lake ferry will take you upriver for several hours to another little landing, Lucerne—a rickety old pier, an A-frame, and a dirt turnaround, where one or two fifty-year-old yellow school busses will be waiting to drive you eleven miles up a series of switchbacks, right up the back of a mountain and into the valley. The views of Lake Chelan and the mountains across the way are great—have your camera out. You may have to wait for deer to get out of the road. Bear typically stay away from the bus racket. And then you're into the village—a collection of old mine buildings straight from the 1930s. There's a three-room schoolhouse, twelve chalets, six long lodges, a dining hall, and a gymnasium with a barber shop

and pool hall down below. The barber shop became Wes Prieb's personal office, where he spent his time as Pool Hall Director for many years until he died, and the gymnasium is used as a chapel. All the buildings are part of a national historic site, so they have strict regulations regarding repairs, and the land under the buildings belongs to the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area. It's an idealistic place, and it's been running as a sort of part-retreat center, part-commune, part-wilderness base continuously since Wes Prieb made his fateful one-dollar purchase and became a local legend.

Like I said, when my family went on summer vacations growing up, if we went far, Holden was typically the destination. I first went at the age of ten—Ben was eight and Sam was five, so it was really the earliest that we could have made the road trip as a family—and we probably ended up going as a family some seven times or so, the last being when I was in grad school. It has been in the background of my life since before I had even been there, when it was only a place near the mountains that were framed around our house, the place my parents met. A mystical place.

There are places and times in your life when you learn your idealism or find your pessimism. Holden was one of my most lasting idealism places. It's the perfect place to question everything—the general crowd who shows up there, either to visit or to go on longer-term staff (working in the village earns you room and board), are transient-types or people in transition who want a faith-based community and isolation. A small community lives there year-round, with many more coming and going throughout the summer for short stints. Everyone eats mostly local (and often vegan) food together in the village dining hall three times a day, and everyone attends evening vespers services on weeknights, which often involve an interesting blend of ancient liturgy and contemporary composition, flutes and guitars and piano, maybe

dance. The ceiling of the Village Center, or “VC”—the old gym where vespers happens—was painted as a huge, abstract mural. A cross-section volcano with deep laval roots erupts into a smoking egg, and a dove takes flight from the smoke, etc. It’s very sixties/seventies. Professors and other speakers cycle through the village and lead discussions on topics related to social justice, environmental stewardship, hermeneutics, Biblical interpretation, Russian literature, liturgical practice, and whatever else. The place attracts people in transition—college students, drifters, the recently divorced, people just coming out as gay, retirees. It’s an oasis for misfits and radicals. And the perfect place to sit in silence at the end of a candlelight vespers service and ask yourself: am I full of shit?

Liberty Hyde Bailey’s father, at least, was not full of shit. He was too legitimate to be full of shit, a hard-scrabble farmer on the frontier who had lost his eldest son and his first wife to disease but still made a farm that would support him and that he would pass on as a productive business to a neighbor when he died in his nineties.

Despite his lack of bullshittiness, or maybe because of it, Bailey Sr. grew into something of a local sage in his community—he had shifted from being a charter member of the local Republican organization during Grant’s administration to a backer of Horace Greeley’s Liberal Republican Party after the scandals that emerged from Grant’s presidency, and then after Greeley’s party disintegrated Bailey joined the Democrats. His ability to adapt and his refusal to accept public office (“aside from the unpaid post of overseer of the roads,” as biographer Dorf points out), along with his local reputation for integrity, earned him significant respect throughout the South Haven area. He was known to take breaks of an hour or so after lunch under the shade of the big spruce tree in his front yard, and people commonly would stop by as

they passed to ask Bailey for his opinions on various matters related to farming, Masonic business, or community affairs, so it wasn't too unusual when a couple Democratic politicians once stopped by with a young lawyer from out east, to see what old Bailey would think.

The story goes that the lawyer proceeded to tell the tale of his most proud accomplishment—the earning of a degree from not one, but two law schools. His pride showed in his manner of standing, his precise enunciation and diction, and his east-coast store-bought clothes. After coming to the end of his accomplishments to date, he asked the old man what he thought of his prospects. After a musing pause, old Bailey made his judgment, as Dorf colorfully quotes:

“I had a calf once that sucked two cows, and the longer he sucked the bigger fool he was.”

Word got out, ridicule ensued, and the young lawyer didn't stick around South Haven very long. But that was the political climate of the frontier, and his father's fiercely independent sensibility stuck with Bailey Jr. his whole life. Like father like son, the junior Bailey would earn the title “sage” during his tenure at Cornell and his long term of retirement, research, and writing that followed. He would also repeatedly refuse to pursue political office, and his friends sometimes became impatient with their inability to corner him to a party.

Of course, I bet that when Bailey Jr. would refuse to enter politics or even to join a political party, some people probably called bullshit. Why—because he talked like an academic?

My family's connection to Holden Village begins in 1981. That story never aged—it was one of the stories my brothers and I wanted to hear again and again growing up. Dad normally told it. But this is how I tell it.

Dad grew up in Gary, Mom grew up in Minneapolis, city kids both, and they met in the mountains of Washington. Dad was “fleeing seminary,” as he puts it—he had given up on the church as an institution and needed some space to think about what he did believe in. He remembers going in to meet with his mentor, a kind of unsanctioned academic advisor, Joe Sittler, to tell him his plans for leaving. Dad recalls Sittler with a certain nostalgic reverence—often at this point in the story Dad digresses to tell the story of the time he sat in a crowded coffee shop in Chicago, and this old man was seated in the booth next to him. They talked for some time, Dad learned that he was a professor at the University of Chicago, in the same neighborhood as the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and by the end of the conversation Sittler asked Dad if he would accept a paid position reading to him. Sittler’s eyesight was deteriorating, and he couldn’t read like he used to, but there were books he had always hoped to get to and he needed someone to read them to him. So Dad began reading to Joseph Sittler regularly—sometimes several times in a week, other times once every couple weeks—he started out with academic journal articles and personal mail, eventually advancing to the full text of *Moby-Dick*. When he eventually began taking some classes at the University of Chicago to supplement his seminary studies, Sittler became an important mentor. When Dad went into his office, to face his intellectual hero and explain that he needed time off, I imagine that he felt weak, flaky, like he might be disappointing one of his most significant role models. As Dad describes it, he sat down opposite Sittler and explained the situation. Sittler listened with all due respect and attention, but as Dad continued, a smile began to spread across Sittler’s face. When Dad finally finished, Sittler reportedly leaned back in his chair, bent his neck back so that he faced the ceiling, and let out a deep belly-laugh. “Good!” he exclaimed. “This is such a stifling place; I don’t know how anyone grows here. You should go.”

Sittler had been to Holden—you can find a series of his talks from the seventies on Holden’s Audio Archive website—and probably knew what Dad was getting himself into.

He went on long-term staff for six months in his flight from seminary and worked a variety of jobs while there. Promotion comes quickly in a village reduced to fifty-some residents in the winter, and his jobs ranged from Head Bus Driver to Fire Chief to Head Maverick. The “mavericks” make up the heavy-lifting crew in the village, the mostly limber twenty-somethings willing to chop firewood, haul stones off of the gravel road, move bedframes, and clear out mousetraps. Dad was working some combination of bus driver and Head Maverick the day he took a bus down to Field’s Point and saw a beautiful woman step off the boat. Rebecca, my future mom, would be staying in the village just three weeks, working (conveniently enough) as a maverick. The head maverick, as it turned out, would assign her work on many of the jobs he himself happened to be doing during those three weeks.

Mom does not tell the story as often, like I said, and the circumstances of her Holden retreat are more mysterious to us. I knew that she hadn’t been able to decide on a major in college and was getting fed up with it. She says that some of her friends told her about it, and she needed to get away.

My parents hit it off as friends, but when Mom left the village, Dad figured he wouldn’t hear back from her—until he started getting her letters. They became pen pals, and when Dad left Holden they stayed in touch. Dad lived in California for a while, where he dated some other girl briefly, then moved to Texas for a year, where he worked at a wilderness camp for at-risk teens, and throughout it he kept in touch with Mom. At some point in that movement, he began to hear about her new boyfriend. This unnamed figure from the prehistory of my family was a Norwegian from the Twin Cities area who graduated from St. Olaf College and apparently had

good job prospects. Mom and the Norwegian got engaged. She asked Dad if he'd be in the wedding, but Dad had to say no. He couldn't bear going, he says.

Then came the fateful phone conversation. Mom made the long-distance call (a big deal back then, as Dad would sometimes remind us) and apparently broke down. She wasn't sure if she loved the guy, felt like she was going through motions. I'm quite sure I've heard the story told so that Mom actually had the stack of wedding invitations beside her, addressed and ready to mail, when she called Dad—but that detail has since been discredited. Dad claims to have listened and tried not to influence her, but by the end of the conversation the wedding was off. Shortly thereafter, Dad and Mom both ended up in Chicago, where Dad returned to seminary and finished his degree—Dad remembers getting off the bus at a stop and seeing her there, the first time since Holden, smitten—and they followed each other around for a little while until they married in the fall of 1984.

“And the rest is history,” Dad might say. After he graduated and did his internship in Detroit, they moved to Jersey City, where Dad served a small inner-city congregation and they lived in a row house with two cats that Mom saved from a dumpster while out running. In December of 1987 Mom had me, and two years later, Ben. We moved to South Haven, the first non-city either of my parents had ever lived in, in the summer of '91, and Sam was born that December. Mom earned her teaching degree in the early years in South Haven and began teaching kindergarten at Lincoln Elementary.

Throughout my childhood, Dad told the story, and we asked him to tell it again and again. Especially when we were young, I remember that he included a certain maxim with each retelling, especially if we asked something like “How did you know you were supposed to get married?” or “Will we have to get married like that?” I'd often ask to hear the story during days

when Mom and Dad would play albums like Paul Simon's *Graceland* or Peter Gabriel's *Shaking the Tree*, loud, while cleaning the house, and Ben and I would each get our overstuffed teddy bear and spin with it in circles in the living room, dancing. The storylines of the songs blended in my mind, and those two albums often sat next to each other in the six-CD player, so that I thought the protagonist of Simon's "Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes" was the same as the one in Gabriel's "Family Snapshot." Regardless, they were always love stories, as far as I could tell, and I wondered about them and about the girls I knew from Sunday school as I spun.

"Your mom and I think that every person has someone else out there whom they'll fall in love with," he'd say. "It's just a matter of finding that person. But it'll happen, and you'll know when it does."

And we thought it marvelous and true.

"Her definition of bullshit is wrong." This is what Corrie, a housemate in Ames, told me when I explained the Rachael conversation to her later. Like me, Corrie had hoped to go into a PhD program in literature after her MFA. For Corrie, this decision largely hinged on the fact that she had lived in the work world outside of academia before, at an office job, and she hated it. Her coworkers didn't understand her, and she had no one to talk to about the books she was reading or the ideas that would come to her throughout the day. She hated it—she says that she hated her coworkers for their lack of compassion and that she started hating herself. Two years dragged on, and she couldn't keep on with it. She would have been the perfect candidate for a stint at Holden, but she didn't know about that and isn't a huge fan of religion, so she returned to academia and loved it. She knew that there are no good teaching jobs for MFA graduates who haven't published a book yet, so she put all her eggs into the basket of one PhD program in

Oregon, which rejected her.

“She’s confusing bullshit with creativity,” Corrie said. “She probably saw people in undergrad who clearly didn’t do the reading and who weren’t even all that interested in the material who still talked a lot in class—and yeah, that takes creativity, right?—that takes a lot of quick synapse-firing—but that’s bullshit. But that’s not what grad students do; that’s not what professors do. Not good ones. That kind of talking comes out of fear—fear of not being taken seriously, or of not doing well in school.”

“Or it comes from a big ego,” I added.

“Right. But real conversation—what you get to do in grad school—”

“And sometimes in undergrad,” I said. “I had some good classes in undergrad.”

“—and *sometimes* in undergrad—doesn’t come out of that at all. You’re not feeling fear at all. What you say in class when you really care about it, that’s creativity. It comes from excitement and creativity, because the tools you’ve gotten from this class are suddenly opening up your mind to whole new ideas and ways of thinking!” Corrie was shouting. “That’s not bullshit!”

“So,” I said, wanting to figure this definitional thing out once and for all, “bullshitting comes from fear and ego. Real academic discourse comes out of excitement and curiosity.”

“And community,” she added. “Real academic discourse comes out of excitement, curiosity, and community. It’s sincere and earnest and it’s not ironic or self-assured at all—you’re always questioning, so then you’re the ones who end up wondering about whether everything that you’re doing is bullshit. But bullshitting comes out of loneliness and miserableness.”

* * *

II.

Despite Liberty Hyde Bailey, Jr.'s desire to stay outside of partisanism like his father had, it turns out that Theodore Roosevelt would be a hard man to say no to. Perhaps if he had kept resisting Roosevelt, Emily could accuse Bailey of contrariness for the sake of contrariness. Perhaps Rachael could have called bullshit on Bailey, on his professed dedication to the cause of rural society and culture (academic-sounding as that may be). But, in this one case, Bailey went against his typical instinct and accepted a high-profile government position, outside of his beloved Department of Agriculture at Cornell.

The Dorf biography attributes Bailey's relationship with Roosevelt as an outcome especially of the 1907 meeting of the Association of Agricultural College Experiment Stations. Bailey had been an early proponent of the land-grant college system (colleges and universities that would add industrial and agricultural education to the liberal arts, although without neglecting those "classical studies"—think: Michigan State, Cornell, Penn State, Iowa State, MIT, U of Minnesota, U of Wisconsin, etc., etc.) and its experiment station and extension branches, and in 1906 the association elected him president. 1907 marked the semicentennial of Michigan Agricultural College (or MAC, now Michigan State University), Bailey's alma mater, and the association decided to meet at MAC that year to help mark the milestone. Bailey had some extra incentive to provide a significant lecture, and he delivered—his talk on "The State and the Farmer" would later become a book of the same name, a meditation on the state of rural America at the turn of the new century. Roosevelt also took part in the meeting, and heard the speech. The resulting book is one of the few Bailey wrote that has been republished in a new edition after Bailey's death, appropriately by the University of Minnesota Extension (1996), and

can also be read in full on their website. The open country had been losing its young people for some time to cities as the nation urbanized, and the economic recession of the time aggravated that tendency even further. Bailey had seen all this growing up—he himself had left, after all—but he responded positively rather than disparagingly, insisting that rural America needed to find new ways to enliven country communities and foster the kind of growth that would attract the right kind of people to the country. Having grown up on a rural frontier farm, Bailey held a respect for farmers and farm families that many other advocates of “rural uplift” at that time, including the back-to-the-landers from whom Bailey would repeatedly distance himself, did not. And many of the proposals he made for rural communities he had already observed in his youth, watching South Haven balloon from several hundred to a couple thousand residents in the 1870s. He argued that the state should only provide a supportive role, must somehow find ways to foster the conditions necessary for an outlook that valued the foundational background spaces of the country—for ultimately the real uplift of country life must come from the farms themselves.

Teddy, it seems, jived with this. When it came his turn to speak at the same meeting, he noted that “if there is one lesson taught by history, it is that the permanent greatness of any State must ultimately depend more on the character of its country population than upon anything else.”³⁴ A year later, Roosevelt sent Bailey a letter, requesting that he accept a position as head of a national Commission on Country Life, the primary purpose being to explore the adversities facing country life and to propose solutions to begin to remedy them. In the letter, Roosevelt described the uplift of rural society as one of the most pressing needs facing America, second only to the conservation of its natural resources. It seemed that the two were on the same page.

And Bailey declined, initially. While he trusted Roosevelt’s general forthrightness, he also recognized that it was an election year, and that the commission might be interpreted as a

move to garner support for Roosevelt's then-protégé, William Howard Taft. Cornell wouldn't want that kind of political implication—and besides, Bailey kept himself pretty occupied without the additional stress of serving as head of a national commission. He was involved in a flurry of book publications and editorships, teaching, and dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell. He was at the height of his professional game—or he was about to be.

But Roosevelt was insistent. He summoned Bailey via telegraph to a 10 P.M. meeting in D.C. The two had one hour together, behind closed doors, before Roosevelt's next meeting at 11 P.M.—Bailey laughed about it later. “Teddy is a tireless man,” he remarked.³⁵ I imagine the two of them in the oval office—Teddy gazing intently through his spectacles, rugged yet refined, sitting behind the presidential desk, and then Bailey, the fifty-year-old farmboy-turned-scholar, like Roosevelt a lover of the outdoors and fresh air, but, also like Roosevelt, caught in a position of refined bureaucracy and deadlines. I imagine he sat in an easy chair opposite the president, one leg crossed over the other with his fingers crossed, maybe fiddling with his fingers distractedly, listening, weighing his options.

I wonder how much of an effect Roosevelt had on Bailey's decision to leave Cornell in 1913. He must have seen in Roosevelt an image of what he himself could become—a colorful political persona, well-intentioned and in many ways prophetic, a defender of the land and the interests of rural America—but swept and absorbed into the sticky tangles of Washington politics and bureaucracy.

But this was something Bailey could do. In his single decade as dean of Cornell's College of Agriculture, the college grew from a minor department of a large university to a nationally recognized, state-financed institution. Dorf gives us the sweeping statistics:

[P]rogress had been made from a faculty of 11 to over 100; from a student enrollment of

less than 100 to nearly 1,400; from a state grant of \$50,000 for one new building to the expenditure of millions for nearly a dozen new buildings; from an annual state appropriation of \$35,000 to nearly \$500,000. No wonder that the venerable Andrew White marveled at “the prodigious success of Mr. Bailey.”³⁶

He had become a leader of influence, and apparently done so without losing track of his values and intentions. He hired the first several woman professors at Cornell, stressing that the rural problem was as much a woman’s as a man’s problem and that each had equal parts responsibility in the uplift of rural society. He also had effectively done what he had intended to do when he left Gray at Harvard in the 1880’s—horticulture was a science, and had a rapidly growing body of textbooks to back it, including several series of them edited by Bailey.

Bailey said yes, on one condition—that Kenyon Butterfield, one of his former students from his time teaching at MAC, be put on the commission, because, as Bailey put it later, he “was impressed with his altruistic outlook.”³⁷ So a Commission on Country Life assembled. Under Bailey, the Commission distributed a nationwide survey to some 550,000 people living in rural areas. They travelled the country, holding town meetings and gathering opinions from farmers, rural teachers, and pastors.

The activities of this Commission forms maybe the most controversial chapter of Bailey’s life, at least how people talk about it today. *The Report of the Commission on Country Life*, penned by Bailey in 1909 but only approved by the Commission in its seventh full draft, has been criticized as being too nostalgic, or too simplistic, or not definitive enough in offering exacting solutions to “the rural problem.” The report was not initially published for the public, due to a hostile Congress near the end of Roosevelt’s term, and for a couple years it was known only as Senate Document 705 of the Sixtieth Congress, Second Session, until the Spokane

Chamber of Commerce decided to publish it independently,³⁸ with a new introduction written by Roosevelt.

Bailey, evidently, was not perfectly satisfied with the document, because in 1911 he went on to publish his own estimation of the situation based on the Commission's findings, a book titled *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, in which he treated the situation as a national social movement arising from the people rather than as a problem needing solutions from the government. In the final chapter of that book, titled "Personal Suggestions," the first of a number of suggestions he offers falls under the rather direct section heading "*The open country must solve its own problems.*"³⁹

You know how some people do that thing where they ask a question, and then, rather than think critically about it, they flip through a Bible and stick their finger on a page? That irritates me. But the other day I did it with the first volume of Thoreau's *Journal*.

When I was in college, I did my senior research project on Thoreau and Whitman and a bunch of ideas that some smart people call "literary ecocriticism," and for a brief spat in grad school I thought I'd keep with the Thoreau thing. (This was before I gave in to my as-yet-unrealized Bailey crush.) So I checked out a few books from the library and put them on my shelf. Thoreau's journal was one of his biggest projects—the thing spans 24 years and typically 14 volumes. I checked out just the first volume, thinking it would be a fun thing to pull off the shelf and leaf through occasionally. Four semesters in, I hadn't read past the first few pages, but I found myself in one of those evening moods when I'm tired but it's not late, when I'm bored but not in the mood for productivity. So I pulled the *Journal* off the shelf and flipped to a page in the middle, and read the entry for Thursday, March 17, 1842. Thoreau was twenty-four years

old, nearly the same age as me then—and he'd die at forty-four.

I have been making pencils all day—and then at evening walked to see an old-schoolmate who is going to help make the Welland canal navigable for ships round the Niagra.—

He cannot see any such motives and modes of living as I— Professes not to look beyond the securing of certain “Creature comforts.” And so we go silently different ways—with all serenity—I in the still moon light through the village this fair evening to write these thoughts in my journal—and he forsooth to mature his schemes to ends as good maybe but different.

So are we two made while the same stars shine quietly over us. If I or he be wrong—nature yet consents placidly— She bites her lip and *smiles* to see how her children will agree.

So does the Welland canal get built—and other conveniences while I live. Well and good I must confess. Fast sailing ships are hence not detained.

What means this changing sky—that now I freeze and contract & go within myself to warm me—and now I say it is the south wind, and go all soft and warm along the way? I sometimes wonder if I do not breathe the south wind.⁴⁰

I know that Bailey liked Thoreau, at least enough to quote a passage in his book *The Outlook to Nature* from Thoreau's *Journal* in which he describes a resident of Concord who he calls the “poetical farmer.” In that section, Thoreau describes perhaps the one farmer in the Concord area who he admired, one who would often let the actual business of farming go while he found ways to admire the landscape “poetically.” While Bailey, who knew a little more personally what it meant to farm for a living, does mention in his book that he “disagrees” with some of the farmer's practices, he also states that he supports his “outlook,” that farmers should see the land

poetically. So anyway, I imagine he had more than a passing interest to wade through the guy's voluminous *Journal* for farming references.

Despite Bailey's interest in old Henry, I feel torn between the two. Consider their life projects: Thoreau, to remain in his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, and try to discover a more grounded philosophy that emerges from the study of the area's natural history ("I have travelled widely in Concord"); and Bailey, to actually travel the whole world in the "quest for knowledge," as he liked to call it, collecting various plant specimens and observing different farming practices, from the rainforests of Brazil to the peasant farming of inner China to his ancestors' haunts in Europe, and thereby try to add to the general human understanding of the world. They both wrote lovely philosophy that grew out of their legitimate struggles with the world—but Thoreau chose to stay put and find geographical rooting, whereas Bailey would become more like Thoreau's friend building the Welland Canal—he left town because he could accomplish "more" that way. And he lived a long life and wrote prolifically, writing and editing over 200 books (as some of the Bailey museum folks like to mention whenever possible), whereas Thoreau died young with only several local projects finished.

If Thoreau had lived longer, and Bailey had come to visit the old man at his house in Concord (it is even more tempting to imagine the two back at Thoreau's Walden cabin—and older Thoreau might retreat back there from time to time), what would they have thought of each other? I don't think Bailey would have overwhelmed Thoreau in the same way that Roosevelt had Bailey—Bailey at least knew how to take it slow, invest his attention in the person or specimen at hand rather than projecting or imposing his own political interests onto the situation. In fact, I keep imagining their conversation as running quite well. I want to imagine it shortly after Bailey's retirement, in the mid-1910s. Thoreau's an old man. Bailey might arrive on the

sleeper in the morning, and walk to Thoreau's for breakfast. I'm sure they'd go walking through the woods, and delight in commenting on the various woodland species of flora—they had both become expert at that, at taxonomy, Bailey through much schooling and study under experts and Thoreau through much individual study in his woods and with his books—Bailey may have the wider botanical knowledge, but Thoreau could probably correct him once or twice here, on home turf. I think they'd spend some time at the various lakes in the region: Walden, White, and the others. They'd make a nice pair in some ways, a couple homely-looking, plainly dressed men, with big noses and unruly hair. Thoreau would undoubtedly still be a single man—he never recovered from losing his hometown sweetheart to another courter—so he'd probably look wilder with the years, and his schedule would be wide open. He'd be living in Concord either on the benefit of friends and family or possibly by then on the earnings of book publishing, which he never made much on during his forty-four years.

Yet surely, at some point, Bailey must bring up the affairs of his studies and travels, the politics of Cornell, his time spent with the President. If he didn't bring it up, Thoreau would ask, and Thoreau would take it in stride—he's used to people wanting to tell him about this or that outside of town, of such-and-such cause that he ought to look into—but it might begin to tire him. Would he become depressed, or has he aged too much for that now? Bitterness might have set in, but then again, I think Thoreau's a too-vulnerable and thoughtful fellow for that fate. (Vulnerability leaves one open to attacks of beauty, of course.)

Perhaps he would have had flashbacks to that night at the age of twenty-five (before this Bailey character was even born, Henry might mutter), walking in the woods after his conversation with the old schoolmate who had set to work on the Welland Canal while he had whittled away the day making pencils. "If I or he be wrong," he wrote that night, after walking

under the stars, “nature yet consents placidly— She bites her lip and *smiles* to see how her children will agree.” She smiles, yet seems to know full well that neither of them have got it, that they are both still grasping for straws at this life game, gazing into their own pools as they hatch the scheme of their day—

Bailey and Roosevelt clearly seemed attracted to each other, and after the whole Country Life Commission business Roosevelt would urge Bailey to run for governor of New York on the Progressive ticket. When Bailey went to visit Roosevelt in 1910 at the former president’s editorial office for *Outlook* magazine, the New York Times reported that “Mr. Roosevelt seized Prof. Bailey by the hand, patted him on the back, told him that the [country-life] movement was a full twin-brother to the conservation plan, and sent him forth to organize a National Convention of country life advocates, with the assurances that when the time came, Theodore Roosevelt would be on hand to push the cause along with a speech.”⁴¹ Bailey had to start dispelling rumors of his candidacy for Congress, and meanwhile, things had turned political at the university as well. In the fall of 1911, rumors of Bailey’s imminent retirement began to circulate again, as they lately had been, when Bailey came into conflict with the Cornell Board of Trustees over administration of the College of Agriculture. He wanted the administration of all state educational programs at Cornell to fall under a new Agricultural Council of the Board of Trustees, rather than under the Executive Committee, as it had been. The committee did not appreciate this curtailing of their power, and let him know this. The student body reportedly stood behind Bailey, partly because his plan included an alumni representative on the proposed Agricultural Council, and the editors of the student-staffed *Cornell Countryman* began to voice their concerns that the College may be losing its much-beloved Dean to the political squabble.

Then an unexpected ally appeared. Former university President White approached Bailey “in great agitation,” apparently flustered because he had just heard that Colonel Roosevelt meant to stop by Ithaca and because he was a “regular” Republican, along with many of the trustees, and worried that hosting so radical a guest might not be discreet. Bailey responded with a characteristically unfazed simplicity and candor: “Oh, he is an old friend of mine. I will be glad to take care of him.”⁴² The day that Roosevelt spent with Bailey in and around Ithaca would become a story that Bailey would tell years later to a graduating class of high schoolers in his South Haven hometown, as an example of the down-to-earth humility of men in the highest positions of power. The two spent much of the day driving around rural New York south of Ithaca, in areas of depressed farm communities that they thought might benefit from a government reclamation program. Apparently they stopped in front of a general store in a small hamlet to pick something up, and after peering in to see the huddle of townspeople gathered around the stove, Roosevelt told Bailey, “You had better get it for me; if I go in there, I’ll never get out!” The context Bailey gives the story suggests not so much that Roosevelt was afraid of being treated as a celebrity, but that he worried he’d be too interested in all the ideas the people inside might have regarding farming that he’d spend the whole day in conversation. Bailey represented a link to real citizens, grounded townsfolk whom Roosevelt seldom, in his constant political swirl, got to interact with. He was like a kid in a candy store. I wonder if Bailey pitied him, then.

Roosevelt spoke to the students of the Agricultural College later that day, offering sweeping praise of the college’s international significance to their roaring applause. Apparently the really uproarious reaction, however, came when he turned to his friend and said, “Dean Bailey, it is none of my affair, but I should regard it as a calamity, not only to the state, but to the

nation, if you do not continue to do your work at the head of this college.” Given the all the gossip in the *Cornell Countryman* and elsewhere, I imagine the student body jumping to their feet. I imagine Bailey’s pert mouth flicking to a smile, I imagine him glancing to the ground and shifting his weight on one leg, maybe gesturing with his hands for the class to settle down. I imagine he began to doubt his plans.

In December, the trustees accepted Bailey’s proposal for an Agricultural Council, and Bailey announced that he would defer plans for retirement until the new plan was in full swing.

Then, in mid-January of 1912, he received word that his father, nearly ninety-two years old, had died in South Haven. That’s all that Dorf, typically a biographer sensitive to Bailey’s personal life, tells us about Bailey Sr.’s passing—a one-sentence paragraph noting the man’s age and place of death. Maybe that’s the appropriate level of “Midwestern stoicism,” as my non-Midwestern friends describe it, for handling the news. But we do know that early that following summer, Bailey left the States for Europe, for a “much-needed rest,” although he also indicated plans to study European agricultural systems while abroad.⁴³

Did Nettie and the girls come along, or did Bailey set out alone for some time wandering new countrysides in the Old World, considering the farms that his great-great grandparents might have worked, searching for the roots of the heritage that had shaped him? Back in the States, Roosevelt had firmly broken with the Taft administration and announced his plans to run on the Progressive ticket, and Teddy’s friends were urging Bailey to run for governor of New York as a Progressive. The day he returned in August, reporters wanted to know whether it was true that he’d be running for governor. “I heard something of that noise when I reached here this morning,” he responded. “It’s very amusing, very amusing.” That semester he left again to study plants in the Caribbean islands until October, and when returned he spoke clearly about his

interest in resigning, although the College did not seem to take him seriously, as they made no move to search for a successor. In spring of 1913 he submitted his intention of resignation, effective summer of that year. In 1903, when he took deanship of the College, he signed himself off to hold the position for ten years, and the years were up. He was also following the guideline he had set for himself back in the 70s as a young student on the train to Michigan Agricultural College. A young man in his first set of store-bought clothes, possibly on his first major solo venture across his home state, he decided he'd spend his first twenty-five years in education, his second twenty-five in employment, and his final twenty-five he'd leave to his own devices. Learning, Labor, Leisure—the three L's that now stand in a linked cycle on the sign outside of the Bailey Museum in South Haven. And now he would follow it almost exactly. It may not have been the plan that Theodore Roosevelt wanted him to take—on the one hand, it seems sort of crazy not to take advice from TR when he gives it to you with such enthusiasm. An acute politician or businessperson might consider the choice foolish—Bailey was only just into his fifties, in great health, and in high demand. He might have risen to prominence. If he had followed the paths that were quickly opening to him, he may not have become the largely forgotten voice that he has become. But his convictions led him in different directions.

* * *

III.

Once a week, Holden does candlelight vespers, in which people sit and sing repetitive liturgical pieces, often from the Taizé tradition, interspersed with periods of silence. A circle of sand boxes sit in the center of the worship space, each with one lit candle sticking up from its center, and as people feel moved they can come forward, grab a candle from a box, light it, and stick it into one of the sandboxes. Few people move at first, but as the droning music continues, you begin to feel less exposed, like the song is a coat that sonically camouflages you to blend in with the rest of the room and the people in it, and you can step forward and sit by a sandbox without feeling too exposed or awkward about it. You can sit there and pray for a while, or just light a candle, leave it there, and go back to your seat. It used to be that the people sitting around in the pews had the option to get up and put a hand on the shoulder of someone who seemed to be particularly struggling, which would sometimes result in huddles of ten or twenty people, some with a hand on the praying person, others linked in a web of hand-to-shoulder contact, until the praying person would get up, breaking the chain, and the whole web would return to their seats in the pews around. I always found it very kind and reassuringly simple. You never needed to know what a person's struggle was, but the fact that they had them made them more like you. Ever since I was ten, candlelight vespers has always been one of my favorite services at Holden. I usually wait until the service is about half over, singing and people-watching, and then go light a candle or two and sit and think. Sometimes I sit down, say to myself "I will think now," and nothing comes, which is fine, because the silence fits the mood pretty well. Other times there's something I really have weighing on me, and there's something beautiful about being able to think about it in the midst of such familiar lyrical droning, floating on waves of communal

emotion and support. If I get going midway through the service, there's a good chance I'll stay until most of the other people have left. Whoever's on the piano keeps playing softly until everyone leaves the sandboxes, although the singing stops after a while and people leave when the half hour is up. I think it sometimes worried my mom when I was younger. She and Dad would usually wait for me to finish, and then walk out with me, and I remember Mom especially asking if I was alright. I told them I was fine, and this was usually true—I would leave the service relieved, if somewhat melancholy, quietly puzzling over things like how I could make the world a better place, whether to approach some girl I had a crush on, or whether I agreed with something I had heard someone say in the village the day before. I was never dealing with any significant personal crisis—I just really liked the atmosphere, and I did some of my best thinking there.

So anyway, there I sat, back in Holden for the first time without my family, for the first time with a girlfriend. The service proper had ended, and most of the people had filtered out. Many were next door, waiting in line at the village ice cream bar. Rachael still sat in a pew behind me, although I didn't realize she was there. I sat by the sandbox and the flames, thighs falling asleep, hands untidily folded in my lap, head bowed. I could feel the fire of some twenty candles in the box in front of me, and the watery space between my pupils and eyelids glowed steadily, unevenly.

Full of shit, full of shit, a voice kept saying in my head. I tried to still myself. I wasn't sure if the voice was my own or Rachael's, or someone else's. Or maybe Bailey's—maybe Bailey would have seen through me, would have seen that I wasn't really cut out for all this academic work. I tried to keep Railroad Creek in my mind, return to an image that had come spontaneously while I had been sitting there, uneasy. *Pebbles. Pebbles and water.*

So let's take Corrie's formula. Bullshitting is a creative process emerging out of necessity, a reaction to fear and loneliness, and therefore is self-assured but neither sincere nor meaningful. Real academic discourse is a creative process emerging out of excitement and curiosity, a reaction to a community of similarly excited and curious people, and is therefore both self-questioning and earnest.

What was Bailey, a bullshitter or a sincere academic? I don't think it's possible to answer that objectively. Doesn't the question just devolve down to whether you like him or not?

And ultimately, how could I breach this with Rachael? Wouldn't she simply call both bullshit and be done with it? That this whole distinction, this whole attempt to define and to justify, is a load of shit?

Do you really think the whole Bailey thing is bullshit?

She said yes. My jaw worked as the lights of the I-94 Tollway flicked over the car and our faces in the Chicago night, and I gripped the wheel, saying less and less as the conversation extended.

She explained again and again that she really did think the work I did meant something, was important even, that she thought I was more earnest and interested in the subjects I researched than some of the professors we had known. That would reassure me, but every time Prof. Kilgore came up, she'd talk about how full of shit he was (and yes, she still thought my critical essays were as well—yes had been the answer, yes). After maybe an hour of rambling conversation, which I allowed to drift more and more into her territory as I worked my jaw and stared at the road, she said, "Love, I'm glad we can have these conversations where we disagree but then end up finding common ground."

Well. We had found *some* common ground. I had openly explained my frustration with people who were academic for the sake of a position, of affirmation or job security, people who puffed themselves up and put others down—cowards, I called them. “But,” I added, “I also just think that the more academics I’ve spent time getting to know in the humanities, the more I’ve become convinced that many of them really believe in the things they write and say”—or more accurately, they really, genuinely struggle to put words to difficult thoughts and ideas in an earnest way. They do what Bailey did, what Thoreau did, what I think more of us actually ought to do. They take big questions seriously, in their own way, and push them, they twist and squeeze them for little bits of truth. The point of a life devoted to study is to grab life by the fistful, by its fabric, and tug it, tease out the little hard bits, filter the world through symbols and thoughts and other people’s ideas—it’s the opposite of narcissism, it almost threatens to dissolve you into unending conversation, and you try to talk back.

“I do not think,” Bailey announced in 1934, to an audience of South Haven locals who had crowded into the local auditorium to hear “South Haven’s favorite son,” now seventy-seven years old, speak, “that with these changes the zest of living has come to an end. The enlarging horizon of the human race makes this the most inspiring time to enter upon the pursuit of truth.” He had just finished describing the advances in scientific and religious understanding, the evolution of human knowledge, and John Dewey’s prediction “that the sciences which are taught will be more concerned with creating certain mental attitudes than with imparting fixed information.”⁴⁴

The “zest of living”—I’ve held that term in my mind for some time. Isn’t that what school is supposed to give? I think back to the reasons I’ve made major decisions in the past. I

remember in college choosing between my English major and my Music major when I decided to add a complementary major in Humanities. I went with English and Humanities, rather than English and Music or Music and Humanities, because I was finding most of my energy and excitement in books and the discussions that happened in my book-reading classes back then. I think of my best classes in grad school—the nights I would walk the mile or so home after night class with Dean Bakopoulos in his course on urban and suburban literature. It was listed as a Creative Writing topics course, but every week he came to class with a stack of books that he would quote from in class that would probably be categorized as “literary”—Anton Chekov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Fyodor Dostoevsky—and every week I loved the quiet walk alone in the dark, because I could fill the whole night sky with all the excitement of that discussion. The world opened up on those nights, it felt, and things clicked, made sense, in ways that I had never known. This is why I’m here, I’d think. I kept having ideas—how to write a new story, how to form worlds in poetry, how I might start my book, why some books work better than others. Writing is incantation, I knew, and I was learning the magic.

There was totally zest in that living, those nights, thanks to the privileges of study and community. My courses in environmental literature and Shakespeare had the same effect. And I know that my professors were as excited as we were—they had the zest too. But as grad school has dragged on and I have spent more time grading composition papers than I have writing my own, and as I have fallen into departmental politics and the odd reality of anti-intellectualism within the very bureaucracy of Iowa State, I have grown tired. I think I do need out for a little while. But that zest—I remember it, and I don’t know if I could find it anywhere outside the university!

Of course, you lose zest when you stop letting yourself be overcome by new ideas and

revelations. The Dewey quote that Bailey gives in his speech, about how “the sciences which are taught will be more concerned with creating certain mental attitudes than with imparting fixed information,” both disarms and excites me. I’m not sure just how accurate this prediction has been in the evolution of the sciences, but it’s what I want out of school. A mental attitude—an outlook to zest and the beauty of the world, an agility to meet life with ready grace and humility.

Excitement, curiosity, community. Zest.

And, to at least some degree, a robust insecurity. If we do not learn to cultivate a kernel of insecurity at our core—or maybe next to our core, next to that creative nugget Personality, if that’s really down there—then we will never slough off the burden of bias, of bigotry, of arrogance that feeds on untainted satisfaction.

That’s what I believe, at least right now. I must have faith in the rightness of the insecure.

That’s not bullshit.

All of these things I might have tried to tell Rachael that day in the car, but none of it came. What returned to my mind instead were those two shelves of Bailey books at the house in Ames, organized by series and date of first publication, a miniature vision of the Bailey Museum Reading Library I had helped organize as an intern; also, the time it would take to read through the ones I hadn’t yet touched; the additional years that a Ph.D. in Literature or in something like Environmental Humanities would tack on to my already extensive schooling (Bailey would have finished his schooling at about the age that I would finish this MFA, after all); and the smallness of the work I had done the previous summer at the little birth site museum in South Haven, my ambitions to return to town and find ways to contribute to knowledge of town history and

Bailey's life. In that 1934 address that Bailey gave at Central School Auditorium—the same old stage on which almost every play and concert I performed through middle and high school took place, which we saw stripped to the bone after the school had been sold away to be converted into condos for tourists—Bailey voiced his wish that “some enterprising group, society, or organization, should record the history of [South Haven], particularly before the older people are gone, and before tradition and speculation have supplanted real history.

“I hope someone will do this for South Haven,” he said. “I have long cherished a desire to come back to South Haven for six blessed months, to retrace the course of the river, to seek the site of the old forests, to discover the old camping grounds of the Indians in the woods, to find the foundations of the old houses. But I cannot do it, because I have twenty projects ahead of me, many of them calling me outside the country, and I cannot accomplish all this, but I hope someone [*sic*] will do it.”

I read this and thought, maybe, maybe I will return to town and do this thing that Bailey wanted done but that no one yet has stepped up to do, find some way to support myself and become a local scholar, give up on the fast-track corporate academic model. On the one hand, the South Haven work seemed in some ways antithetical to the scholarship route—it was like desiring the best of both Thoreau and Bailey, impossibly rolled into one big project. Of course independent scholars do exist. But does either *really* accomplish anything? My secret ambition, to reintroduce Bailey at least to college curricula by convincing academia of his importance—what was really the benefit of that? Faced with the bullshit charge, it seemed selfish—I just *like* Bailey, I like that he's from my hometown and actually made a name for himself and for the town as more than just a pretty quaint village, and I love his philosophy and writing, writing that gives me new eyes for the world. But is he worth the attention I'm giving him? I felt my life

suddenly compressed, rather than liberated, by the narrow focus, the specialization of my studies. Perhaps we've forgotten Bailey for good reason—ultimately, for poeticism of prose, I admit that Bailey can't match Thoreau.

I thought of James Wright's poem. Have I, already, wasted my life?

When Kija Manito created the vast south-side bluff of Nikonong to place his throne Kitchiwik, I imagine he spoke words—I imagine this is partly why Simon Pokagon insisted on using so many Algonquin words in his retellings of stories like that one. When God of the book of Genesis created the World and its shores, god spoke words as well. I wonder if we who so understand the universe through language can truly imagine creation outside of language, we seem so bounded by it.

Bounded and liberated, because with language comes creative as well as preservative power. But as creative as we may strive to be, the whole works starts to crumble and mold as soon as preservation is forgone. And, so far in human history, preservation still must reside in mental participation as well as in the physical guarding against the elements. Once a book has lost its last living reader, it has been lost, even if it sits physically embalmed in some crate, attic, or library archive. As with the mummified, physical preservation does make possible a text's renewed life—but it takes the student who is willing to engage it. We can only do our best, especially when the original author has long died. We cannot forget the prejudice that now exists against the opinions of the deceased—but if we create in community, we create with them. We stand to benefit from their life. The more beautiful the reading, the more fully the text awakes.

Bailey, I want you to know that you're still alive. Alive and zesty.

Dear Bailey,

Did I ever tell you how I found you? I don't mean in the biography at the Valpo library. My father wouldn't have called me to prompt me to look it up if it weren't for a professor and an ethicist, each of whom I met as a sophomore in college. And that ethicist has died.

The professor, Jamie Skillen, was a two-year visiting professor working at Valpo on a "Lilly Fellowship"—a program designed to get promising young academics into cool teaching positions to jump-start their careers. One day, at the Honors College's weekly symposium, Jamie approached the podium. I don't remember him being on the symposium schedule or having known he would be there ahead of time, but he came to the podium and projected a slide show of beautiful landscape shots that reminded me instantly of Holden and the Cascades. It turned out the pictures actually were taken in the Cascades, but they were Oregonian Cascades, and then he showed us pictures of a strange, otherworldly, scrubby landscape that he called the "high desert," followed by images of rocky boulders protruding from the edges of the ocean.

The next semester I was in the class. We met once a week for the second half of the spring semester, and then we'd take a train out to Oregon where we'd spend three weeks meeting with forest service workers, ranchers, preservationists, Native American rights activists, water policy experts, and others. And spend a week camping on the high desert and travelling through the landscapes Jamie had shown us in his slideshow.

Jamie was the one who arranged for James A. Nash to spend a day on campus to give a lecture and visit with students. Jamie described Nash as on the forefront of "environmental ethics"—a term we might group you under, Bailey. I knew I'd have to miss the lecture, but Jamie had arranged a time for Nash to meet with our class specifically. Jamie sent us all a copy

of an essay by Nash ahead of time, called “Toward the Revival and Reform of the Subversive Virtue: Frugality,” so we’d have something to talk about. I still have my copy—stapled in the upper-left corner, photocopied by Jamie out of the book *Consumption, Population, and Sustainability*, a thick, uneven frame of black ink around the edges. The paper has loosened where the staple pierces it, and the corners have gone soft and slightly rounded from being hauled around in a packed backpack for months in college. Pen ink fills the margins with excited scrawl. Now the essay sits packed in a hanging file in an old wooden filing cabinet that I inherited from my dad, a filing cabinet that used to stand in our bedroom growing up, filled then with stuffed animals and video game instruction booklets. That hanging file has all the photocopied and printed articles from the semester in Jamie’s class, many of which he suggested in order to help me write my honors thesis, many of which remain unread, although I keep telling myself that sometime I’ll be doing something so relevant that I’ll be glad to have that file as a starting place for research. Maybe.

The point of the article is basically the point my dad tends to make when talking about my great grandma Ida Larson, who lived to be a hundred. It’s a point that many of us make when nostalgically referring to that quickly vanishing generation that lived through the Great Depression as children. The point is: You can live with much less, and live a happy, long life. That and you might actually be happier. *Back in their day*, we say—fewer and fewer of us can say *back in my day* with the same weight of meaning that *they* could. I remember my algebra teacher in high school, a nervous, tangent-prone woman, who multiple times in the one year I had her would come to tears in the middle of class, talking about how her mother or her grandmother used to put strips of cardboard in the bottoms of her shoes when the soles wore thin in order to make them last longer. We could appreciate the sacrifice and the emotion it stirred in

her—but we also appreciated that we didn’t need to stuff cardboard in our Reeboks.

Of course, back in your day, Bailey, you didn’t even have store-bought clothes at home—I know you didn’t even have a set until you left for college. How would you speak today to our dependence on electronic entertainments, on easy travel, on restaurants and word processors?

But Nash wrote of frugality as something much larger than sacrifice—true frugality must sustain happiness and well-being, or else it fails its purpose of providing a legitimate style of living. His prose rings with purpose and clear-headedness, and at the end of the short introduction of the essay he outlines his purpose like this:

I argue that frugality is not an anachronistic or innocuous norm—an “old-fashioned” or “garden variety” virtue. On the contrary, frugality is a richly relevant and potentially transformative standard to combat excessive and unfair consumption *and* production. Solutions to major social and ecological problems depend on the revival of this virtue into a social norm—as, indeed, it was intended to be in Puritanism and its predecessors. The frugality I interpret and defend is an ethically conscious form, intentionally responsive to social and ecological conditions, rather than an unexamined “way of life” of individuals or communities.⁴⁵

I was hooked. And the conversation we had with him in our little ten-student class was marvelous. My memory of him, I am afraid, is fading, but I remember the hunch with which he sat in our classroom, the rest of us sitting in chairs or cross-legged on the floor in a circle, and I remember the smile he had for us. He seemed like a contented man.

In the conclusion of the essay, he indicated that “[t]his norm [of frugality] deserves much greater theoretical development and practical interpretation than it has received in modern Christian ethics.”⁴⁶ So I was interested in that—was anyone working on such development and interpretation? After asking that, I think I remember him losing some of his contentedness. “Well, in fact,” he told us, “I’m in the midst of a book project right now, all about frugality.” We looked at each other around the room, smiling. “I hope to be wrapping it up soon.”

I made a mental note, and a few times later that year, while I was working on my honor's thesis for that class, I searched for books by James Nash on Amazon.com. (I had little concept at that time of the time involved in completing and publishing a book.) Eventually the frugality book slipped my mind, and I stopped checking Amazon.

Until, midway through graduate school, I remembered. I searched Amazon again—no dice. And then, out of curiosity, I googled James A. Nash.

The first link that caught my eye was an obituary.

He had died. And not only did he die—he died in November of 2008, just the semester after we had met with him. Acute myelogenous leukemia.

I scanned down. “His family, meanwhile, has the draft of what was to be his final book, ‘The Subversive Virtue: Frugality as Social and Ecological Imperative.’ Dr. Nash did not think it was polished enough and wanted to return the advance his publisher had paid.

“‘He was the most meticulous writer that I know,’ said Dr. Nash’s wife, Millie. ‘He didn’t find writing easy. Somebody once said in “Loving Nature” there isn’t a page that doesn’t have a quotable line. He took pleasure in writing, but he did not take pleasure in the second-rate. If he could not make it perfect, he didn’t want it to go out.’”

Bailey, I cried.

You would have loved this guy. His Wikipedia page calls him “one of the first Christian ecotheologians”—right there with that generation that included my dad’s professor Joe Sittler. (Of course, someone might inform the author of the Wikipedia article about *your* books, I know.) *Loving Nature* was the only book he published, but he was active in the field of environmental ethics his whole life.

I worry when these voices die, Bailey. I realize that my generation is inheriting the earth.

CHAPTER EIGHT, VANISHING RAVINES, SHIFTING BASELINES

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you.

-T. S. Eliot, from “The Wasteland”

May 24, 2009

As I try to begin writing in the study, Maddie stumbles in. She knocks her nose against the clothes hamper before coming to rest next to my chair, expectantly. My mouth smiles but I think my eyes are sympathetic. Still, she’s interrupting. I need to get these things down.

Maddie has always been clumsy, so in some ways age has only augmented the traits which have always endeared her to the family. But I think we all understand that the cataracts on her eyes are real and her loss of hearing tragic. She turned thirteen in October, and generally looks her age—but despite that, this cocker spaniel’s got spunk. The fact that she can’t always see quite where she’s going will not keep her from a full-throttle run around the kitchen and living room when she knows she’s due for a treat, and regular head-to-wall collisions when rounding corners she takes in stride. Maybe that’s what makes her situation more hilarious, and more tragic, to me than that of the Verdonks’ twelve-year-old Max, the perennially grouchy Scottish terrier who won’t venture more than a few hesitant steps at a time in his blindness before pausing, shaking in his uncertainty and arthritis. Maddie is unafraid to knock right into the clothes hamper if she knows you’re there and she wants out, and if it weren’t a sign of her mortality it wouldn’t be sad at all.

That’s the way to go, I sometimes think. I reach down and pat her head softly, scrunch her up a bit under the collar. “Do you need to go outside?” I know she can’t hear me, but as I

rise she gets excited and spins a quick circle right there before half-trotting, half-sliding behind me on the hardwood floor towards the kitchen door. I'm fascinated by the way she has aged well, despite her developing handicaps. She plops down the concrete steps into the yard and the late May sun, and I let her go without a leash because I know the squirrels don't have to worry anymore.

Last night I dreamed I was on a travel seminar with students from school, and we made a stop at the northern ice cap—although the penguins that slid down all the steep slopes around us should have indicated Antarctica. We awoke one morning in a warm, smoky log cabin, emerging from four-person rooms in plaid flannel caps and insulated boots. A sort of North-Woods polar ice cap. Adventurous and hormonal, we stepped out into the thick, crisp snow, cronching our way and breathing wisps into the weightless air. The world was blue, the sky only slightly darker than the snow and ice which it met on three horizons, and before us lay the long, dark bay, surrounded by sheer walls of snow-ice. A great Antarctic fjord, it reflected no light, wide and long as unknown genealogies and holding as much power, deep and unrevealing.

I followed the water's siren call and walked straight to the ice-bluff's edge, not so different from the lake bluff on the South Side of town. Three others followed. Someone said, "I wonder how often these walls slide into the ocean." Dark waves lapped at the icy periphery, salty, feasting.

Then the cabin behind us, I believe, was gone.

Childhood

Everything from those days comes back obliquely, at dark tangents. They come together

in recomposed aggregates.

Like this: lattice-work shadows lay over us, and the place smelled gritty, wet. The mud was so fully saturated with water that only scattered weeds grew in it—tree roots couldn't breathe, and dried trunks leaned like toothpicks at crazy angles. Ben and I, having climbed over the smelly creek on the old wide log (a perpetual presence, a fundament), sprinted past fallen limbs, around thorns, over Doritos wrappers and milk jugs. Our feet slid backwards with each step, but the angle of our bodies leaning forward kept our momentum up and we hurtled through the ravine, away from the monsters we had agreed were chasing us. The sky hung red and heavy with dusk.

Halfway through, we could see where the creek disappeared in the dark shadow of the concrete tunnel. We ran toward it because we knew it, because there was nowhere else to run. If we could just touch it, we'd be safe—we'd repel the staggering grave people and flying mudmen with the force of its power.

Our Nikes squished into the deep ground. Keep running. We pushed down struggling strands of grass, face into the mud, frail roots popping under pressure. The world slid around our vision and our shoes, sharp shapes like cartoon vultures angled around the edges. There—the tunnel that leads under the road. The clunk of cars that pass above. We each slapped it, the cold immovable concrete, the rough pebbled statement, with our pale palms. Back flew a wave of security, and we turned to face it. The creek, the mud and stones, dead trees and live trees and the decomposing everything. A Halloween shadow had come over most of the ravine, and red clouds towered above the trees. We could not see the entry slope that was too steep and slippery for our parents to descend. The creek hissed coolly and slipped through the tunnel's metal grating.

May 24, 2009

My distinct memories of her I could count on my hands, and some I only remember because they were told me. This past December 31st we celebrated Grandma Gladys's 102nd and last birthday. Our family hadn't seen her since her hundredth, and this occasion more than merited another trip from Michigan up to the nursing home in Harmony, Minnesota. The day of the party, a polka band played in the main gathering room to a host of hearing-impaired elderly residents. Our family wheeled Gladys into a smaller meeting room down the hall, with a table and cake and several Mylar balloons. She sat in the center of the room, in front of the cake (exactly where she would want to be, if she could see it), with the rest of the clan gathered around, chatting and listening to her one-on-one conversations with other relatives. My great grandmother showed the same spirit that I remembered and noticeably enjoyed the chance for conversation. Her short-term memory was essentially gone, and her eyesight and hearing were poor enough that conversation was always limited to the one person sitting next to her wheelchair, but she relished in the occasional opportunity to crack an old joke or speak some Norwegian.

"What kind of car do you drive?" she asked after a lull in the circular conversation. It was not the first time this afternoon she had asked this.

"Well, we drove a Ford van down here, Grandma." I knew this to be the right answer, had learned what to say.

"Well you know what they say. Either you *own* a Ford, or you *can't* afford." I laughed loudly enough for her to hear, and her whole face pulled into a toothy smile, pleased to be enjoyed. Everyone laughed to the joke, for perhaps the third or fifth time.

Later she asks, leaning a little towards me, “What did you say your name was?”

“Oh, I’m *John Linstrom*. Becky’s son.”

“What?”

“My name is John Linstrom,” I shout.

“John?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, I thought you were a girl.” Laughter from the whole room as I run my fingers through my longish blond hair. Everyone is listening now.

I shrug dramatically. “Sorry!”

“Well, you are what you are, and it takes all kinds to make the world.”

Now there is laughter and applause. I smile, appreciating the somewhat qualified acceptance.

She hasn’t finished. “Linstrom?”

I feel my cheeks heat up; one uncle says “uh-oh.” We are in a room full of Austins and Johnsons, descendents of Gunder and Martha Ostenson—Norwegians all. My father’s contribution has been detected. “Um, yeah Grandma, I guess I’m a Swede.”

Gladys Torkelson is silent, but looks away, tightens the corners of her mouth, and shakes her head. The family is roaring.

I arrived home for the summer several days ago, and as Sam and Mom helped me haul my boxes and bags from the car Maddie amazed us all. I had just exited the front door to pick up another load when I heard Maddie barking fiercely behind me with a power I had not heard from her in a long time. Sam, Mom, and I all reached Maddie at about the same moment, and we started

laughing. Two women were taking a walk along the sidewalk in front of our house, about fifteen feet from the door. Maddie stood there, erect, half out of the house, aware of our motions and on guard duty, barking with all her might at the walking ladies like she would have several years ago.

“It’s a miracle!” Mom said. We had no idea she could still see that far.

Maybe age doesn’t so much dull the mind as it simply reduces the urgency and the bodily capacity to cut with it. The puppy sticks around despite the old dog’s cataracts. It’s a nice thought.

And then death, in which nothing could be more urgent than the dark fjord before you.

Recent thoughts

An invisible scar runs through my hometown. Built on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan, South Haven was once divided, a quickly developing agricultural community to the east and “Fish Town” to the west, split in two by the “Big Ravine”—a huge swampy gap between dunes that was only passable by foot. Several multi-lane bridges spanned it in the 1860s, allowing carriages to pass from one side of the small frontier town to the other. All that remains today of the marshland that once defined this town is a narrow ravine, a few noticeable depressions, and the immense, undetectable destruction of once-teeming habitat.

And no one ever *told* me.

I first heard of Fish Town and the Big Ravine while perusing a collection of papers bound into a small booklet, tucked away in a cardboard box at the Bailey Museum. The cover, which appeared to have been made from the brown paper of a grocery bag, had a blue rectangle attached to the front announcing, in slightly shaky black marker, the generic title of the

collection, “Liberty Hyde Bailey,” underlined neatly five times. The pages all had local newspaper articles pasted in, collected and included mostly chronologically, spanning the years 1926-1935. About half of the pages had come unbound but lay in place. What vulnerable preservation! A small sticker in the top corner of the first inside page identified “MRS. BERTHA E. JACQUES / 4316 GREENWOOD AVE. / CHICAGO, - - ILLINOIS” presumably as the compiler, or the sometime owner, and in the middle of that page was later stamped “SOUTH HAVEN MEMORIAL LIBRARY / CITY AND TOWNSHIP / SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN.” On the next page, someone had written in light cursive pencil, “Give this book to Library in South Haven, Mich.” Written before the stamp, but after the sticker, presumably. As it turns out, though, the library has a microfiche collection of all the old local papers, and at some point the booklet was apparently donated to the Bailey Museum. It first came into my hands after my summer interning at the museum—John Stempien mailed me a partial photocopy after it came up in a phone conversation that the museum had it, and since then I have made a full photocopy for myself. And so this fragile collection of glued-together scraps has been saved from trash heap and moldering storage, from flood and fire. And if the original and photocopies are destroyed, an imperfect impression will be left on my memory—but not enough to cite. This small stack of photocopied pages is my defense and arsenal, my evidence against memory that this town looked so different.

The most exciting finds were the articles that included partial (and, the editor admitted, imperfect) transcriptions of the speeches Bailey made as a distinguished visitor to his hometown in the early 30s. In 1930 he spoke as the honored guest at the local high school’s fiftieth graduating class, more than fifty years after Bailey had attended school in town, back before the school had become “graded.” He spoke on the stage at Central School, back when it was new—

the same stage I would stand on some seventy years later, a terrified middle-schooler playing Rooster in *Annie*, in the auditorium that would later be named after one of the most influential music teachers in our school district, Mr. Listiak, who would build and live in the house that my parents bought when I was in fourth grade. “I have come back to my old home,” Bailey said, on stage that June afternoon. Several old classmates, who presumably hadn’t left town, sat on stage beside him. “My heart is too full to speak. On this ground once stood our old school. None was ever so good; we know because we went to it. It was called a high school, because one room was over the other.”

I collect these facts and claim to know something about myself. I look in the mirror and see the massive bricked ruins of Central School, half abandoned and half developed into condos, the gaping hole where the boiler room once sat, the boiler room that we broke into to steal ancient telephones, the pond that has formed in the boiler room’s pit and the reeds that have grown up in it, the croak of bullfrogs.

In his talk, Bailey took some time to wax nostalgic. “With one exception,” he said, “the most wonderful place in the world was the ravine west of the school. It was hundreds of feet deep. It was inhabited by monsters, and wonderful creatures. Had we seen them? No; that was why we knew they were there.”

I wondered if the mudmen and grave people I remembered were of the same ilk, or smaller.

“More wonderful, however, than the ravine was the sandhill where we played as boys. All that is now left of that sandhill is the hole in the sky where it stood. It must have been all of twenty feet high. There on what was to others just a sandhill, were forests and jungles, and down in the streams that flowed through⁴⁷ it we went in diving bells, and had wonderful adventures

about which we told wonderful stories. That sandhill is now South Haven grown bigger. All the achievements of after years are simply the enlargements of the aspirations of simple little children, aspirations which stretch to the horizon of their childish vision.”⁴⁸

January 1, 2008, early after midnight

The only sharp pencil in the house is also the shortest, which I have carried in my pocket, one of the Dixon Ticonderogas that Dad kept from the Dixon factory that closed near the row house in Jersey—it is in my hand now as I try to record this night, to prepare for later years’ remembrances.

About an hour ago. We have fifteen minutes until the ball drops. Maddie woke up when Grandma and I woke everyone else up about fifteen minutes before, and now Dad says she has to go out. Okay. I get her excited with a few words, close so her old ears can hear, and we race and wobble to the door. The TV warbles in the background. We look out the door and I open it.

Snow—heavy, thick. Snow that could clot your arteries. And it’s falling in congealed clumps, actually splashing as it strikes the slick patio’s well-shoveled concrete. Maddie pees on the snow-blotched sidewalk, staring at us miserably, and we let her back in.

The snow hangs heavily on the branches of the old lone sassafras, raising each one vertically as if someone made a uniform smear over my glasses. I suddenly realize the odd thing: it’s one of those nearly-midnight times when the sky is bright. Pinkish, subdued, certainly not dark. We figure the snow reflects light on the clouds, or vice versa. We look at each other with sudden children’s eyes. “It’s a winter wonderland,” Ben says.

Without stating any intent at all, we bound through the living room and get our coats and shoes. On the way back to the back door I explain to the family, “It’s a winter wonderland.

We're going out. Be back before the ball drops."

Sam's getting ready behind us now, but Ben and I start running out. Don't lose momentum. I can't tell if it's snowing anymore or not. Follow your muscles. Ben takes off first, making half an 8 with his footprints. Go. I follow suite, carving my own way, grabbing a branch near the ravine and shaking the snow down onto me. Feel it! We've run around the backyard, now around to the front. It's midnight. Ben giggles and assumes a buoyant eastern European accent; "he'll have to follow our steps!"

Front yard now, and a little tired. We see a blue city truck down the block with a cherry picker. "The whole city of South Haven's in that truck," Ben says. We run back again now, and Sam is outside. We run with him a bit, but he breaks the spell some. He doesn't seem to understand; we had been mainly silent, but he shouts; we had never made contact, communicated from our own courses, but he seems to chase us. When he gets close, he rams into us or tries to push us into the snow. And he has probably been trained to do this by his big brothers.

Ben heads inside. I feel bad and try to run with Sam again, but to no great improvement. He's not doing it wrong; it's just wearing off now. Sam's headed toward the door, I feel bad, and it looks like Ben might be coming back out. I turn and walk back into the ravine a little way. It seems so small in this snow and this light. I see what looks like a stick pile actually is a tree fallen over, as if cut down. It probably fell in the big wind storm. Now snow covers it, like everything else. I know that I could jump and tumble down the hill and into it, and the snow would make it all feel the same.

May 24, 2009

After the Ant/arctic ice bay it was straight to the Kalahari, where we inexplicably made a

stop at the Khorixas farm where I had stayed a week the semester before, studying abroad in Namibia. The sun radiated off the hot desert pavement as I walked by myself between the gnarled and twisted, dead-looking, solitary trees of *northern* Namibia in the dry season. And that landscape had now been set uncomfortably amid the tall, red sand dunes of the *southern* desert—the whole country forced to wrap around itself in my imagination. But I wasted no attention on the dunes. I cried, and something faded. I took a clothes line like my host mother Magde had used, already lined with pinned garments, and began stringing it between the trees like Tibetan prayer flags. For some reason, the farm's corrugated tin and dung houses were nowhere to be seen, and I did not meet any members of the Bowe family or their livestock. From tree to tree I tied the line, and each branch painfully yielded to the tight, unforgiving twine, old bark flaking at the touch and stunted limbs wearily supporting the load. Oh, the pain of trees, a poet once said. I heard a voice calling, saying it was time to go.

“But, where are you *really* from?” Gladys asked my mom, her granddaughter. It would have been impossible to know if this question stemmed from some thought in her head, some doubt, or if it was merely an attempt to keep the conversation going. Regardless, Gladys asked it, and it deserved an answer.

Mom leaned toward her father, Curt, who stood behind her, and muttered from the corner of her mouth to him, “That’s a hard question.” She turned back to Gladys, full-voiced. “Oh, Michigan.”

Gladys nodded. She nodded from an island in an endless sea of Minnesota. “Sounds like a long way!”

Later, during another long pause, as the two of them sat unspeaking, surrounded by the

chatting of relatives enjoying punch and company, Gladys looked up toward the blinds and squinted. “Light’s gone but it’s not very late here,” she said. After more silence she broke out, in a nasal, croaky, low voice, into some old Norwegian folk tune, made subterranean and gravelly with her age, and so escaped uncertainty into the deeper patterned grooves of an Old Country which she—Gladys, matriarch—one hundred and two and my closest connection to the Norwegian roots—*had never even seen*.

“Maddie.” I open the screen door to let her in. It’s hot out there for an old dog like you, pup. Maybe I left her out there too long while I was typing, but she doesn’t seem too miffed. She wants a treat and I want to give her one, so I open the drawer and she spins a circle on the linoleum. It is too early in the day, and we run the risk of a messy accident later, but her request seems so simple. I know she won’t remember it, and in a half hour she’ll forget she had been outside and come to me, hoping again that I will put her out and give her a treat afterwards. But right now I pet her and scrunch her skin under the collar as she enjoys her reward. I think she must deserve it. She certainly expresses no qualms, and that’s enough for me. Her back leg shakes with arthritis, and I try to soothe it away with my massage.

Memory from a week before Thanksgiving, recorded January 2013:

I agreed to meet a couple at the museum who had called and asked for a tour during the week I was home for Thanksgiving. They were most fascinated by the maps, especially the aerial map of South Haven from 1880. It’s a work of art, the result of a team of cartographers who spread out across the streets of the frontier town while a couple of them went up in a hot air balloon, making measurements, noting architecture and varieties of trees, taking pains to

illustrate tiny horse-drawn carriages crossing the bridges across the ravine in the middle of town to indicate just how substantial those bridges were.

The husband, a retired forester who has lived in South Haven a number of many years, points to the ravine. “Look at how wide that is!” he says. “You can really tell that that’s just the space between the two dunes—it’s like what you see at Grand Mere State Park now, dunes separated by marshland. That’s what this ecosystem was like...” He goes on to describe how much silt must have washed into murky Black River, which the midtown marsh opens right into, and how much dredging must have been needed to allow the barges of that time to get into and out of the harbor. “You can understand why they’d want to stop up some of that silt flow,” he explained, “both to increase land for real estate and effectively to ‘clean out’ the river.”

I would later confirm this, accidentally, while going through a report made by the newly formed South Haven Pomological Society to the also newly-formed Michigan Pomological Society on the state of and prospects for fruit-culture in South Haven. It was December of 1871, and Bailey was thirteen. The report, co-written by Bailey’s neighbor Aaron Dyckman (now vaguely memorialized by a street name and a small public beach on the North Side) and a couple other locals, makes much of the market advantages afforded them by their harbor:

It will be noticed, by glancing at the map of Michigan, that this town is located at the mouth of Black River. It is a village of about two thousand inhabitants,—having increased to that number from four hundred, within the last four years. Four years ago she had no harbor, the shifting sands of Lake Michigan blockading the mouth of her river, so that it was accessible only to the smallest sailing craft. Now, by means of plying, she has a harbor capable of accommodating the largest vessels and steamers that ply the Great Lakes.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, it seems, the swamps would be sacrificed.

In another of his public talks in South Haven during the 1930s, Bailey begins to address the problem of loss of wetland. Standing before locals of the town he left, he seems to start into

unusually pointed criticism of the destruction of habitat, when the editor interjects with “Here Dr. Bailey proceeded to ...,” apparently skipping that portion of the talk for something more uplifting. I wonder how specific Bailey got. I wonder if he brought up the topic of extinction, via memories of the passenger pigeon of his childhood, those darkened skies, or if he offered concrete measures by which some wetland might be saved. I wonder if he told any more stories.

May 24, 2009

When I woke this morning and walked downstairs my dad was on his way to work, but he had a message for me. I can always tell when he starts to speak whether it’s bad news, and I can often tell a death from other kinds of bad news. He’s a pastor, and knows how to talk about these things. Right now it is too early and my head is swimming in a fading dream, so I can only be certain that it’s something serious.

“I want you to know that Gladys died last night. Curt called about midnight with the news. If he or Ruth call with details about the funeral, give your mom a call at work, and then let me know. I’ve got to head in to the office for a while.”

Gladys Torkelson; one of George Austin’s seven children; mother to one beloved son, Curtis Johnson, by old Carl Johnson whom I would never know; claiming one granddaughter by this son, Rebecca Johnson Linstrom, the only name on her will, my mother, heir to Gladys’s bag of adjustable rings and plastic necklaces—Gladys was the last surviving member of her generation on either side of the family into which my mother birthed me. A farm girl, a flapper, a mother and a dancer.

The last time I saw her was at that last, hundred and second birthday party. Someone dressed her that day in a black stretchy shirt covered with silver speckles. She had found the

shirt when shopping with my mom at Wal-Mart the time she visited us in Michigan. It was a flashy thing, very mod. But, you know, it takes time to find the right size, especially for those as fashion-conscious as 88-year-old groovy neo-flapper Gladys. The first time she emerged from the dressing room, I think Mom must have laughed and screamed a little as she said, “Grandma! Get back in the dressing room and put a shirt on!”

At her 102nd someone had also tied a stylish black bandana around her head which matched the shirt well, to cover the lump made by the expanding tumor. Later, I heard that the lump had begun “weeping”—a frightening term doctors use to describe the tears of blood which emerge from the skin when stretched taut over such protuberances. This outfit, the glittery black shirt and the black desperado bandana, was at once comically chic for the old woman and a little too reflective of her mortality.

The doctors guessed that she would die from blood loss, from “weeping” to death—but they were wrong. Grandma Gladys had a stroke a few days ago, rendering her, for the first time in one hundred and two years, speechless. That was the day Maddie barked at the walking ladies. She died last night in her sleep, the Minnesotan pre-summer air wrapping warmly around her body while the rest of the universe spun, busy, about that epicenter.

Recent thoughts

Sometimes, when scientists talk about environmental changes—especially now that the realities of climate change have been reshaping the very face of the planet—they use the term *shifting baselines* to describe the way that people’s memories have a tendency to sort of *shift* along with the environment around them. As the marshland in the area of the Big Ravine slowly alters—first from the deforestation along its banks, then from the alteration of river flow via

“piercing,” then maybe from the continued expansion of residential properties and the shoring up of ravine edge in order to enlarge backyards—most folks probably forget that there used to be occasional plovers and herons that stopped by, or the amount of time it used to take to walk to the hardware store through the swamp, or how much more diverse the plant life was in Baer Park back when that pit was continuous with the full gorge of the Big Ravine and not a green-lawned crater beside the half-condo half-ruin of Central Elementary. The environmental norm for them shifts—and then they have kids, and maybe they don’t tell their kids the stories of the way things were, of the great new absence of topography and biodiversity that runs through the middle of their town like a scar they can’t see. And those kids have a really different baseline than their pioneer parents who first settled there, and no one knows that there’s a problem or that anything’s been lost. (*Is there a problem, or a difference only?*) Another *several* generations later, here I come. Oblivious. And I spend my childhood summer days running through the mere tributaries to what was once there, skipping around the edges of scars that aren’t even raw anymore.

My reaction to this, as someone concerned about history and place, about biodiversity, is to seize up and shout. *Stop!* I think. *Go back!*

We can’t, of course. And we’re entering irrevocably into an era that pitches us about along with all the other members of our living family, plant and animal. The poles cross, regions blend as weather stretches its limbs in new directions, like my dreamed Khorixas tossed into the Kalahari. Zebras do cross the sand dunes, seeking new ranges, pursued by lions. We wait, more and more regularly in South Haven, until mid-January for our first snow cover. Birds build nests too early, their eggs freezing and blowing to the ground, eggs cracked, mothers crazed.

Some days I really panic. I see correspondents talking coolly about one unusual weather

condition after another, and I wonder why no one else seems to be panicking. I feel knots twisting in my stomach and I have to stand up, get outside, take a walk in the abnormally balmy air, fat squirrels rambling about confusedly in the January grass.

May 24, 2009

Next thing I remember we were back to the polar bay, the salty waves gnawing at pristine white walls. No one else noticed the difference, so I pointed. “Look, the water is freezing; the bay is shrinking!” Ice had begun to coat the relentless sea, protruding from the right side wall in two lumps, piled high, somehow, with sugary snow. Students whipped out notebooks to sketch the phenomenon. No one spoke of hope or doubt.

And as I awoke I transitioned to the Khorixas farm again, this time lying with my back on the bed of the one-room matchbox house, the mattress soaking up my sweat, my lungs breathing heavy and humid, my heart beating with the here of the alive while my hair seemed to sink back into the pillow, through the mattress, and into the dry earth below to take root and cling, and when I really did lift my head from my pillow I wondered that I felt no connection or tear, that I drifted through my bedroom’s air so effortlessly in the weight of the morning, Tibetan prayer flags hung across my window in the heavy morning.

It is a marvelous planet on which we ride. It is a great privilege to live thereon, to partake in the journey, and to experience its goodness. We may co-operate rather than rebel. We should try to find the meanings rather than to be satisfied only with the spectacles. My life has been a continuous fulfillment of dreams.

L. H. Bailey, the last words from the speech he gave for his ninetieth birthday celebration in Ithaca, New York, 1948

CHAPTER NINE, DEAR BAILEY,

I just thought you should know that you got a lot right. I can go through your books and note the places I wrote *prophetic!* in the margin. But a lot has happened, and I've got some problems I wanted to run by you. I hope you don't mind if I start off a little heavy. I hope I can get to some uplift by the end. You were so good at that.

Prophetic. You told us, in your longest-loved book, that “[a] good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one’s work to nature, to fit the crop-scheme to the climate and to the soil and the facilities.”⁵⁰ True—in 2008, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development finally gave us a definitive and deeply researched statement that the most effective way to “feed the world” in the future will be through various forms of locally-centered sustainable agriculture, not through adding more petroleum-based fertilizers and poisons to our quickly eroding monocultural landscapes (hey Corn Belt, yeah you). Instead of learning to *adapt* as the organisms of the global ecosystem have done naturally for millennia, and as you said we should too, we’ve so often found more exciting ways to try to force our surroundings to adapt to us under the excuse that we need to, in order to feed the world—and really, the “solutions” we’ve tended toward have only been geared toward what’s easier, cheaper, and allows fewer people can make more tons of money faster. Efficiency, you called it, Bailey, and warned against it—and it turns out that what’s efficient in the short term tends to undermine us in the long term. As you noticed in 1911 (with less urgency than may be appropriate now) we are no longer a “new-land society, with all the marks of expansion and shift”⁵¹—and so we need to be moving toward some sort of “ultimate permanent reconstruction,”⁵² toward “permanent progress” and not some cheap ephemeral get-rich-quick

prospector-extraction. “It is now a time to be conservative and careful,” you wrote.⁵³ Boy, you must have been unpopular. No friends in Washington or Wall Street, that’s for sure. Don’t know you it’s all about risk-taking? How did you expect to *stimulate* (like some electric jolt that worked well once, like some sex trick overused) old Papa Economy?

It’s not news; we just keep finding out in more ways that you were right, that your “outlook to nature”⁵⁴ made the most sense, even more than “outlook to solvency,” “outlook to gain,” “outlook to riches.” Outlook to “Efficiency”—yes, you hated that word, always capitalized it like some false god. A “particular vogue,”⁵⁵ you called it—and you called it that then, just before we entered what would become only the *first* World War. I wonder how jaded you became after we entered the War that year—then you’d write of “State Efficiency” as “almost a religion in these days” that *true* democracy would “repudiate.”⁵⁶ What’s our *goal* anymore? I wonder this. We want more, thinking that somehow more material or wealth will come with more time to enjoy it, but the truth is that time clamps down. We work faster to extract more, and we lose time, we forget to love and play, we leave our grandparents and parents in nursing homes and retirement communities far away, we leave the preparation of food and the *construction* of clothing to Others living Elsewhere, maybe the next state over, maybe oceans away. It’s an old story now, but go back a hundred years to when you were writing, good Dean, and you saw it as new and, appropriately, a threat.

Outlook *to* nature—you made it directional on purpose I think (not “of” or “on,” but *to*)—the direction of your gaze thereby goes outward toward everything not you—thus, humility, reverence, and (we hope) grace. We confuse Efficiency with Grace these days, I think, maybe more so since your day. The grace of a heron opening its wings and waving into the sky—it may not be the most efficient way of getting off the ground, those great long wings, and I bet we

could get a more energy-efficient model going—but it’s self-contained, it’s performance against odds, it relies on no one else (except, we’ll admit, the energy of the sun, passed through the food chain to the *frugal* diet of fish that the heron has enjoyed that morning). That grace *burns* nothing, kills little, diminishes not its environment. We in our automobiles at best race to find more fuel-efficient cars, but too seldom urge the real answer—drive less. Driving is not graceful; driving burns the dead carbonite remains of so many organisms per mile, it rips up the earth in search for more of those dead, it underpays hosts of worker-extractors to boost up the Oil Barons in charge, it makes war on vulnerable countries that possess rarer and rarer pockets of those geologic burial-grounds. It blasts entire mountains now, Bailey, and skins the earth raw.

Grace. Scientists working at Harvard have finally begun to nail down the likely “culprit” behind Colony Collapse Disorder among bees—imidacloprid, one of the most widely used pesticides that bees encounter both in the nectar of plants and in the high-fructose corn syrup that many beekeepers use to feed their bees (and that we eat regularly in everything).⁵⁷ Of course, the culprit is actually us, for using the stuff in the first place. I guess it’s a lot easier than integrating your field into a more diverse ecosystem (which also takes care of lots of pests),⁵⁸ or doing what farmers had been doing to achieve at least limited agroecosystem diversity since the Middle Ages—crop rotation.

I remember running from bees as a child; my mother said it was the moment she knew I was a runner. I remember my grandmother teaching me to handle bees gently, that if I waved my hand slowly in the air around the bee without touching it, whispering softly, “Go away, bee, go away,” the bee would, really, go away. Now I think of all the thousands of bees dying, their tiny husks dropping dryly, literally half of the pollinators of our food (who so unknowingly lend us their grace!) dying in the last year alone.⁵⁹

“We have been obsessed of the passion to cover everything at once,” you wrote, “to skin the earth, to pass on, even when there was no necessity for so doing.”⁶⁰ *Skin the earth*—and in 1915. You had no idea. You never saw communities frayed by the *removal* (read: demolition, read: extermination) of the tops of *mountains*. You never saw the tar sand shale-oil extraction of the Boreal Forest—even when *there was no necessity for so doing*, you said—you would have travelled to see them (you traveler) and heard the ugly facts, the fact that the net energy gained from the earth’s *skinning* barely covers the energy expended in its extraction—and then—God, Bailey—then *this*



Maybe you would have just googled it, like me, like so many of us. This image is so out there. But I think you’d have taken it upon yourself to go see it. You’d have deemed that worth the carbon.

A “permanent agriculture,” you said.⁶¹ We finally streamlined the term and made it attractive, ~permaculture~, and now, low and behold, it’s a concept that we’ve discovered is actually necessary to begin to counterbalance all the exploitive “mining of the earth” (as you would say) that we’ve been doing since your time, that we’ve amped up rather than moved

beyond. “Farming has been very much a mining process,” you noted *in 1915*, “the utilizing of fertility easily at hand and the moving-on to lands unspoiled of quick potash and nitrogen.” If only you knew! “Now it begins to be really productive and constructive, with a range of responsible and permanent morals.”⁶² *Permanent morals*, for a permanent agriculture—what a concept, what an entirely worrisome agenda! Who decides the morals, the ones that should become *permanent*? Maybe you should have specified that in that chapter, Bailey, but thankfully I read the other books in the series and I know—it’s the *demos*, of course, the people, in their individual communities on the land, influenced by the land. People educated by each other, educating each other, cooperating. That’s all the third progression you plot out, reminiscent of—or, I suppose, anticipating—Wendell Berry’s more distressed historical tracing of what he called the “unsettling of America.” You always sounded more positive—you thought we were right there, on the cusp of permanence, of sustainability—that we had moved well past the first “collecting stage,” in which “man sweeps the earth to see what he can gather,” and were actually moving out of the mining stage (which two years later you would call the “epoch of destructiveness,”⁶³ as we watched World War erupt), that we were already making our way steadily into the “producing stage.”⁶⁴ Agronomists will tell you that we are being productive, more than ever, but if you could just *see* it, Bailey, you’d know. We are mining the earth for our produce, mining it in the Middle East and the Boreal to feed the feed plants of the American Midwest with petrol so that we can feed the unhappy swine that we will in turn feed upon. *The unsettling of America*—rather than settle and try to make the best of local situations, given the immeasurable damage that was already done during colonization of people and place, we kept roving, right through your life and smack into mine—roving, I imagine Sauron’s evil eye flitting over the land, restless, searching for that tiny treasure he’ll never get and sending his armies to

trample down whatever motley resistance he met. But you didn't have those kinds dystopian fantasy tales, I suppose, back then. They would come soon.

Our *demos* has been suffering lately, Bailey. I am again reminded of that most haunting prophecy of yours—"It is said," you wrote in your 1927 book *The Harvest*, "that in the future we are to have corporation farms of 5000 acres and more. Perhaps; this prophesy regards farming only as an industry. If so, the world will be ruled entirely by corporations, agricultural, industrial, commercial, professional, for the corporations would control government: we shall have a government of corporations rather than persons. . . . and democracy, as we now conceive it, will be difficult or impossible."⁶⁵

Well, that happened. Rhetoric has structured itself around corporate farms as progressive, the way "to feed the world," and farming as a family and community enterprise has been demolished, the basis of trust between producer and consumer erased, the practice of careful stewardship of the land toward the end of increased fertility squashed under the fertilizer-caked heel of Big Ag. And I think you would be pained to know the role that agricultural extension agencies have played in the game, Bailey. The extension agencies you fought for lost track, at least for awhile, of the family farmer as a legitimate interest group, and drifted to the free-market, corporatized, expand-or-decline schema. The *demos* has been subsumed by Corporate, and the environment, the background land we all live against, has been diminished by us all. We have penned the land into monoculture the way we've penned chickens into confinement barns, injecting it with all the poisons and hormones we can, forcing it to bear large, distorted, and frequent offspring so that we can feast more cheaply. "The demand for cheap food is fallacious."⁶⁶ That's a nice quote. In your day, the issue was the exploitation of farmers. In our day, the issue is not only the exploitation of farmworkers, but also the support of

irresponsible corporations that cannot give a damn—irresponsible in their absolute disconnection from consumers, for a corporation has no neighbors, and lack of neighbors does indeed make democracy “difficult or impossible.”

I guess this gets to the thing that’s been bugging me, Bailey. The predictions you really got spot-on were all of the negative ones. The positive ones, it seems, remain elusive, like Hobbits hiding in the hills. I worry, sometimes, that they’re not really there at all.

~

I don’t have answers, and I don’t know how to bring this letter to you to a close. I am trying to make my life on a vast but shrinking planet, my dear Bailey, and I know what you will say—I am young.

Before he died, James A. Nash, the ethicist, told us that joy would be requisite to our ability to effect social reform. Joy in simple gatherings, in the birds of the neighborhood, in the skies that surround us no matter the weather. It was a warning against the old romanticism and for the maybe older content that comes from living simply. It’s what the directors at Holden called a “just and humble lifestyle” in 1981 when my parents met there. It’s what you meant at the end of your ninetieth birthday speech when you said that “We should try to find the meanings rather than to be satisfied only with the spectacles.”⁶⁷ And again, you once wrote, “Let us have the commonplace, for indeed it is rare!”⁶⁸

I remember I once met a couple friends at a predetermined spot on a predetermined day in a January blizzard in Indiana. We found each other by faked owl calls, and we gathered in a circle surrounded by trees in all our winter gear. We were college students, and we wanted to start a secret society. Each person brought a piece of inspiration—we read passages from Fredrick Buechner, Dr. Seuss, and Walt Whitman. We giggled and made plans to take the

campus by storm. We would print off leaves of poetry and philosophy and leave them all over campus, we would scrawl cryptic messages in imagistic code with chalk across the university sidewalks, and we would leave little signs here and there, where they would be seen by only a few people, to make those people smile. We were strategizing the salvation of the world with tiny bits of joy.

You wrote in *The Seven Stars* that we need to balance the view of the landscape with the view of the flowers, and you seemed to imply that the view of the flowers may be the more difficult one for someone with too much schooling. We were planting flowers that year.

You wrote in *Universal Service* that “How to work with enthusiasm for oneself and at the same time to work with enthusiasm with one’s fellows, is perhaps the major problem in life,” and then you proposed, so boldly, so fearlessly, a “Society of the Holy Earth,” a society not meant to exist for the sake of organization or to operate “parliamentary machinery,” a society with “few officers but many leaders,” one “controlled by motive rather than by a constitution,” in which “the associations will be fellowships of the spirit.”⁶⁹ Then:

“Its principle of union will be the love of the Earth, treasured in the hearts of men and women. To every person who longs to walk on the bare ground, who stops in a busy day for the song of a bird, who hears the wind, who looks upward to the clouds, who would protect the land from waste and devastation realizing that we are transients and that multitudes must come after us, who would love the materials and yet not be materialistic, who would give of himself, who would escape self-centered, commercial and physical valuations of life, who would exercise a keepership over the planet,—to all these souls everywhere the call will come.”⁷⁰

Dear Bailey, and dear Earth, we have heard that call through the centuries, the millenia. We do not know where we are headed, but we begin to apprehend that the joys are everywhere,

waiting to be loved. We hear around us an undertone of life that yearns for continued reverberation. We sense that we are neither the end or the beginning, that we have come in the midst and will leave like that, that while we are here if we are to flourish it will be in life and the protection of it, and in the rejection of the things of death. We embrace vulnerability and uncertainty in the face of great love, and we reject self-centered egoisms and self-righteous dogmas.

We are the New Frugalists and we must stand for the little wonders and the delicate things. We see we are everywhere bounded by waves, bounded and liberated by the washings of memory that lap at our shores. We taste the sand in our cheeks and wonder. We seek first to understand and to love. We live as plain members and citizens, as keepers and cultivators of health. We are winged and clawed and swimming and creeping. We are rooted, but we are not entrenched.

Dear Bailey, we find ourselves in your footsteps, and we take off in new directions. We haven ourselves where we are and work toward the cycling of new ages. Our lives are the continuous fulfillments of dreams.

CHAPTER TEN, NIKONONG

That feeling that Kija Manito must have felt—“smiling in the teeth of the storm”—is one that so many South Havenites have felt, and surely one that generations and generations felt when the settlement was still called Nikonong by the people living there. The way Simon Pokagon tells it in his small booklet *Algonquin Legends of South Haven*, the story goes back to the Mashkode, or Prairie Tribe, who lived in the area long before Pokagon and the Potawatomi had moved in. He writes that the Ottawa had driven the Mashkode out some four hundred years before the writing of his booklet, which was sold at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and “nearly exterminated them.” Because the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi occupied the same area as the Mashkode’s original village, where South Haven is today, they held “much reverence” for the story of its creation.

And the Mashkode, according to Pokagon, were called the Prairie Tribe because they were farmers. They cleared “large tracts of land” for agriculture, and there lived peacefully, “seldom going on the war path.” I wonder if something ancient in the landscape and water-horizon instilled these same values in the small Anglo boy named Liberty who grew up looking over the same shores some four hundred years after the Mashkode had been driven out by the Ottawa, some fifty years before Pokagon published his little booklet on South Haven, when Potawatomi still camped on the Bailey farm, still paid visits to the little homestead, and still walked the woods with that little white boy. At his ninetieth birthday, Bailey remembered going out with some of his Potawatomi neighbors to the north end of his father’s property, where they would burn over about ten acres and trap passenger pigeons. “I knew the Indians,” Bailey said,

“and I picked up something of their outlooks.”⁷¹ I have never seen Bailey comment on Pokagon’s work.

The Potawatomi named the village, when they occupied it, “Nikonong,” which Pokagon explains “derived from two Algonquin words nik (sunset) and o-ni-gis (beautiful).”

“South Haven of the white man,” Pokagon writes, “with all its shipping docks and cottage crowned hills, does not in beauty compare with Nik-o-nong of the red man with its deep wild woods, its bark canoes and wig-wamed shores.”

I remember, as a child, going into the water on yellow-flag days—days that you were advised to go out only with caution. The waves crested around my shoulders, I’d throw my back into them, and during lulls I would turn to face the nameless horizon and shout, “Is that all you’ve got? Is that all, big bad Nature? Come on, you can do better!” My skinny legs shivered as the riptide sucked back at them and another wave came crashing into me in a wet smack. So I took my anxieties, all the taunts I had absorbed at school, and tried to hurl them, concentrated, at that presence that felt so huge, so ancient, and disinterested. I do think I could feel something of the age and power of that place, then. I wanted so badly for it to overwhelm me, or to come close, close enough that I could only just barely keep above it.

I still look for that feeling. I wonder how easily it can be summoned, or if it requires the Great Lake or some other great force to impose it onto a human.

In the case of Kija Manito, he smiled in the teeth of the storm. He weathered it. Who knows for how many hours the rain beat against him and the thunder roared around him? The cyclone of water, one imagines, must have crashed, broken right into him with a great roar. Did he stagger? Did he see the possibility of falling, of being swept? Or was it all a part of his passionate love to be there then? What we know is that he did not do what he might have—he

did not stride into the Great Lake to become part of the whirling wind and weather. He stood on the shore, and he stood apart, and he smiled.

And with time the sky at the horizon cleared away, revealing the sun, still setting. The rain stopped. Kija Manito must have gazed at that sun with sudden wonder. His smile must have faded. Why had he smiled in that storm? He did not smile now.

He turned to the shoreline, where his great bow lay. He lifted it, bent it across mikatik, his knee, and with his breath blew a blast that swept the great bow away to the east, filling the space between the setting sun and the clouds above. It blew to the east, and as it blew it stretched to cross that whole vast horizon, reaching around the sky all the way to the tops of the shaken green trees behind Kija Manito's raised head. Was this the great conception of kitchichang that he had worked out high on Ishpeming's crown? That hilltop gleamed in the sun behind him now.

And then Kija Manito opened his mouth, and echoing the thunder that now passed over the land to his back, he shouted to the horizon (so that all could hear behind):

Kawkanaw, inini nashke nin wab sa awniquod.

All men behold my bow in the cloud.

See, it has no mitigbiminakwanke ma pindawan.

arrow, string, or quiver.

It is the bow of peace.

Tell it to your children's children,

that Kija Manito made it and placed it there

the great spirit

that generations yet unborn,

when they behold it,

may tell their children that Kija Manito placed his bow in the clouds

without an arrow, string or quiver,

that they might know He loved peace and hated war.

If you have travelled to Nikonong, you have most likely seen the bow.

“And now,” Pokagon writes, “in old age, as with feeble step and slow [Pokagon] is passing through the open door of his wigwam into Wawkwin (the world beyond) he must sing in his mother tongue his last song on Earth, ‘Nik-o-nong, Nik-o-nong, nin-in-en-dam mi-notch-sa bi-naw ki-kaw-kaw-ka-naw ki-ke-tchi-twan-in nin sa-gia Nik-o-nong! (Nik-o-nong! Nik-o-nong! I shall yet behold thee in all thy glory, my loved Nik-o-nong).”⁷²

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a retelling of a story from the small booklet *Algonquin Legends of South Haven* by Chief Simon Pokagon of the Pokagon band of the Potawatomi. Pokagon relates that the original tale, which you can access at the Library of Michigan or at the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum in South Haven, Michigan, was passed on to his people by a tribe called by them Mash-ko-de, meaning Prairie Tribe, because they cleared land and lived “somewhat as farmers.” This is a liberal and poetically reinterpreted retelling, and not meant to represent the ancient story in any historically accurate way. The final sentence is a direct quote from Pokagon’s text.

² Bailey, L. H., *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1911, print, p. 220.

³ Bailey, L. H., *The Seven Stars*, New York: Macmillan, 1923, print, p. 165.

⁴ *Liberty Hyde Bailey*, hand-bound collection of newspaper clippings, mostly from the *South Haven Tribune*, unknown compiler, unknown date of compilation, located at the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum, South Haven, Michigan, last accessed summer 2012. A photocopied reproduction is in the possession of the author.

⁵ “Visitations.” Filbrandt Family Funeral Home. Web. Last accessed 14 January 2012. www.filbrandtffh.com.

⁶ Dorf, Philip. *Liberty Hyde Bailey: An Informal Biography*. Ithaca: Cornell, 1956. Print, 39.

⁷ Interestingly, according to Bailey’s journal, Dorf gets some of the following information wrong. Bailey records working as a reporter at the *Morning Monitor* in Springfield in his first entry of the year in 1881, whereas Dorf claims he doesn’t get that job until after his graduation from MAC, for \$8 a week. It would seem that Bailey may have returned to the *Morning Monitor* after graduation, although it throws into question the colorful story Dorf tells about getting the job in 1883 after selling a bunch of subscriptions to families in a Portuguese colony at the edge of town.

⁸ Bailey, L. H. *Garden-Making: Suggestions for the Utilizing of Home Grounds*. New York: Macmillan, 1902 (1898). Print, 3.

⁹ Dorf, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-27.

¹² L. H. Bailey, *The Garden Lover*, New York: Macmillan, 1928, pp. 36-38.

¹³ *Garden-Making*, 1-2.

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- ¹⁴ Bailey, L. H., *The Holy Earth* (1915), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, p. 7.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ¹⁸ Dorf, Philip, *Liberty Hyde Bailey: An Informal Biography*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1956, p. 205
- ¹⁹ Bailey, L. H., *The Apple-Tree*, New York: Macmillan, 1922, p. 8.
- ²⁰ *Universal Service*, 16-17.
- ²¹ *What is Democracy?*, p. 7.
- ²² Bailey, L. H., *The Garden Lover*, New York: Macmillan, 1928, p. 146.
- ²³ *The Holy Earth*, p. 49.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Wes Jackson's *Nature as Measure*, Wendell Berry's *What are People For?*, and Fred Kirschenmann's *Cultivating and Ecological Conscience: Essays from a Farmer Philosopher*. None of them grant Bailey tons of space, but they all treat his work with reverence.
- ²⁵ Montmarquet, James A., "American Agrarianism: The Living Tradition," *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde, Nashville: Vanderbilt U Press, 2000, p. 72.
- ²⁶ Bailey, L. H., *The Harvest: Of the Year to the Tiller of the Soil*, New York: Macmillan, 1927, p. 83.
- ²⁷ *The Holy Earth*, pp. 28-9.
- ²⁸ *Universal Service*, 14-15.
- ²⁹ Morgan, Paul A. and Scott J. Peters, "The Foundations of Planetary Agrarianism: Thomas Berry and Liberty Hyde Bailey," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 19 (2006), pp. 443-68.
- ³⁰ *The Holy Earth*, p. 135.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ³² *Universal Service*, p. 17.
- ³³ This is a retelling of a story from the small booklet *Algonquin Legends of South Haven* by Chief Simon Pokagon of the Pokagon band of the Potawatomi. Pokagon relates that the original tale, which you can access at the Library of Michigan or at the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum in

South Haven, Michigan, was passed on to his people by a tribe called by them Mash-ko-de, meaning Prairie Tribe, because they cleared land and lived “somewhat as farmers.” This is a liberal and poetically reinterpreted retelling, and not meant to represent the ancient story in any historically accurate way. I liberally borrow from, as well as reinterpret, Pokagon’s masterful text.

³⁴ Dorf, Philip, *Liberty Hyde Bailey: An Informal Biography*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1956, 150.

³⁵ This and prior details regarding Bailey’s leadership in the Country Life Commission, *Ibid.*, 144-53, and Rodgers, Andrew Denny III, *Liberty Hyde Bailey: A Story of American Plant Sciences*, (1949), New York: Hafner, 1965, 348-404.

³⁶ Dorf, 161.

³⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁹ Bailey, L. H., *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1911, p. 201.

⁴⁰ Thoreau, Hanry David, *Journal: Volume 1: 1837-1844*, Ed. John C. Broderick, et al, Princeton: Princeton, 1981.

⁴¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154-57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁴ “Famous Scientist Sees Present-Day South Haven as Symbolical of Striking World Changes of Past Seventy-Five Years,” *South Haven Tribune*, May 9, 1934.

⁴⁵ Nash, James A., “Toward the Revival and Reform of the Subversive Virtue: Frugality,” *Consumption, Population, and Sustainability: Perspectives from Science and Religion*, edited by Audrey R. Chapman, Rodney L. Peterson, and Barbara Smith-Moran, Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000, 167-90, p. 169.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴⁷ Originally spelled by transcriber as “thru.”

⁴⁸ From *Liberty Hyde Bailey*, collection of newspaper clippings, held at Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum, South Haven, Michigan, print (and paste).

⁴⁹ *First Report of the Michigan State Pomological Society.*, Lansing: W. S. George and Co., 1872, print, p. 416.

⁵⁰ From the classic: Bailey, L. H., *The Holy Earth*, 1915, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, print, p. 11.

⁵¹ Bailey, L. H., *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1911, print, p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ The title of a great book you should read: Bailey, L. H., *The Outlook to Nature*, New York: Macmillan, 1905, print. If you've got patience and large chunks of time to read it in, read that first edition version (which I first encountered—you can get it printed on demand from Cornell), but if you have a shorter attention span and want to read it in shorter chunks, get his Revised Edition, first published in 1911. It even has Wendell Berry's stamp of approval—he quotes it in his book of essays *What are People For?*

⁵⁵ Bailey, L. H., *Universal Service*, 1918, Ithaca, NY: self-published, 1919, print, p. 26.

⁵⁶ Bailey, L. H., *What is Democracy?*, 1918, New York: Macmillan, 1923, print, pp. 67-8. (READ THIS BOOK!)

⁵⁷ Harvard School of Public Health, "Use of Common Pesticide Linked to Bee Colony Collapse," press release, web.

⁵⁸ Landis, Doug, "Redesigning Agricultural Landscapes for Multiple Ecosystem Services," 8th Annual GPSA Research Symposium, Iowa State University, 11 April 2012, lecture.

⁵⁹ Wines, Michael, "Mystery Malady Kills More Bees, Heightening Worry on Farms," *The New York Times*, 28 March, 2013, web, last accessed 31 March 2013.

⁶⁰ *The Holy Earth*, p. 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

⁶³ *Universal Service*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ *The Holy Earth*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Bailey, L. H., *The Harvest: Of the Year to the Tiller of the Soil*, New York: Macmillan, 1927, p. 83.

⁶⁶ *What is Democracy?*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ *Words Said about a Birthday: Addresses in Recognition of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Natal Day of Liberty Hyde Bailey*, delivered at Cornell University: April 29, 1948, paper pamphlet, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Bailey, L. H., *The Outlook to Nature*, New York: Macmillan, 1905, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Bailey, L. H., *Universal Service* (1918), Ithaca, NY: self-published, 1919, pp. 163-4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

⁷¹ *Words Said about a Birthday: Addresses in Recognition of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Natal Day of Liberty Hyde Bailey*, delivered at Cornell University: April 29, 1948, paper pamphlet, pp. 25-6.

⁷² The story of Kija Manito is a retelling of the story told in *Algonquin Legends of South Haven* by Chief Simon Pokagon of the Pokagon band of the Potawatomi. All quotations in this chapter, besides Bailey's, come from Pokagon's text, which you can access at the Library of Michigan or at the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum in South Haven, Michigan, and which was passed on to Pokagon's people by a tribe called by them Mash-ko-de. Kija Manito's statement when facing the sunset is also a direct quotation from Pokagon's prose, which I have reformatted with line breaks. The story's retelling is liberal and poetically reinterpreted, and not meant to represent the ancient story in any historically accurate way. I liberally borrow from, as well as reinterpret, Pokagon's masterful text.